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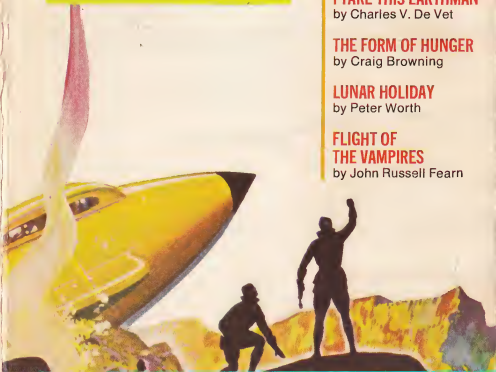
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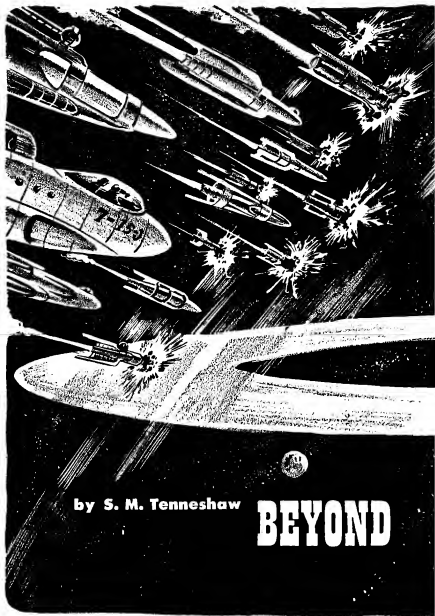
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-
- | | |
|-----|--|
| 4 | BEHIND THE
WALLS OF SPACE
by S. M. Tenneshaw |
| 40 | CUBE ROOT OF
CONQUEST
by Rog Phillips |
| 52 | TOO MANY WORLDS
by Irving E. Cox, Jr. |
| 66 | "OUT OF THIS DUST ..."
by Charles Recour |
| 76 | I TAKE THIS EARTHMAN
by Charles V. De Vet |
| 90 | THE FORM OF HUNGER
by Craig Browning |
| 106 | LUNAR HOLIDAY
by Peter Worth |
| 119 | FLIGHT OF
THE VAMPIRES
by John Russell Fearn |

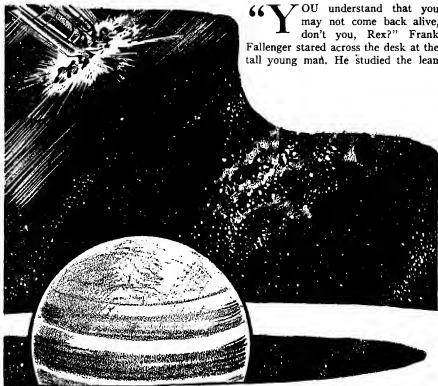
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by S. M. Tenneshaw

BEYOND

“YOU understand that you may not come back alive, don't you, Rex?” Frank Fallenger stared across the desk at the tall young man. He studied the lean



THE WALLS OF SPACE

*Blair watched the flames engulf John Masters
But there's more than one way a man can burn...*

hard features for some indication of the effect his words had had. There was none. The eyes of Rex Blaine were steady and there was no fear in them. They were cold and sharp. Sharp with cold, grim purpose and determination.

A sudden smile tugged at Blaine's lips. "If I come back, Frank, I'll be alive. If I don't..." He shrugged the thought off fearfully, but the smile remained.

Fallenger sighed. "All right. So you're not going to back out. God knows you'd have every right to. Even with blastoff scheduled for dawn tomorrow."

"I'm not backing out. We don't have to go through that again. Has the ship been checked?"

Fallenger sighed deeply. "Checked and rechecked. Just as every other flight was checked. From the first to the last—the one John Masters captained."

The smile faded from Blaine's lips at mention of Masters' name. He stared thoughtfully at Fallenger for a long moment, saw the questioning look in the eyes of the Rocket Base Director.

He could see in them the same story that must have been in his own. A story that went back two years to the first experimental flight into space beyond the Moon. Man questing for the planets and beyond. Man who had conquered space to the Moon. That had been the first step, the Moon. A big one, but only the first. The next step to the planets and beyond had then been taken. A ship had blasted off into the void.

It had never returned.

There had been others afterward. Ships with many improvements. They flew all right to the Moon. They sailed across that two-hundred-and-forty-thousand-mile stretch of space with

ease. But then they pointed their noses to the stars—and vanished.

The last to take this second step had been John Masters. Masters, a good rocket pilot, one of the top men in his graduating class at the Lunar Base School. Masters was a cool man, as smart as they came. He had gone into space in a ship that had been checked from stem to stern; on paper that ship should have been able to reach Pluto and back without refueling. Had he reached Pluto? Had he even reached Venus? They would never know. Masters was gone—like the others. And now—

"What about the radio equipment?" Blaine asked, breaking the sudden strained silence. "I want to be in contact with base at all times."

"Triple checked. You won't have any trouble with it."

A GAIN the smile tugged at Blaine's lips. But now there was a touch of grimness to it. "That's what we thought before. Six months ago we told Masters the same thing about his equipment..."

Fallenger got to his feet from behind the desk and started to pace slowly back and forth in the room.

"That's the one thing I can't figure, Rex. Sure, a ship can be hit by a meteor—although the odds against every flight ending like that are beyond reason. But it's the radio equipment cutting out that gets me. And just like clockwork, out in the middle of space with the nearest planet still hundreds of thousands of miles away—pffft! A crackle of static and that's all. I tell you it borders on the uncanny."

"I'll check with you every five minutes, Frank."

Fallenger stopped his pacing and nodded. "Good. Now what about your crew?"

"Two of the best. Ned Kline on ra-

dar and radio; George Carter, my master technician."

"How do they feel about it?"

Blaine shrugged. "Like me they have no ties, family or otherwise. They won't back out."

"Then it's all settled." Fallenger's voice held an odd tightness. He walked around the desk and stopped in front of Blaine. "You'll be careful, Rex?"

"Careful men don't leave Earth, Frank. We did. Space is a gamble any way you look at it. I'll do my job. Let's leave it at that."

Fallenger nodded slowly and there was deep respect in his eyes. "I wish I were going with you, Rex. But—"

Blaine shook hands with the older man, understanding. Then he turned to the door. "You'll be out on Ramp Five at blastoff?"

"I'll be there."

Blaine nodded and strode from the room, closing the door behind him.

BLAINÉ walked slowly across the Lunar ground from the control building toward the barracks. The powdery pumice beneath his boots made a sloughing sound that seemed to whisper ominously. He glanced up toward the plasti-dome that covered the base like some vast bubble. Up through the artificial lighting of the fluoro-screens toward the vast crystal-clear blackness of outer space beyond the dome. The stars were brilliant pinpoints up there, steady, untwinkling. They looked as if you could reach out and touch them, pluck them from their ebon blanket.

He thought of the other men who had looked at those same stars as they crossed the pumice landscape of Luna. They had reached out in their silver rockets, shot from the airlocks through the dome and out into space. They had reached—what? Were their bodies floating in some erratic orbit in

space even now? Was the memory and knowledge of their failure a warning to other men such as he? Was man incapable of reaching the other planets and eventually the stars beyond them? Was space a wall too difficult to climb?

He knew this wasn't true. Man had conquered space. He had had to, to reach the Moon. Space could be no different out toward Venus, or Mars, or Pluto. It was a vacuum and man had shot his metal ships into it successfully. But only to the Moon...

As he neared the barracks he glanced off to the left toward the rocket ramps. There were ten of them, lined in a single row. All were empty now, with the exception of Number Five. In its cradle lay a long, sleek tapering rocket, its nose pointed into the cylindrical tube that connected the airlock with the dome above. The ship was waiting.

He felt a sense of pride as he looked at the ship. For it was his. And once he left Luna the stars would be his too. He would not fail. He must not fail. He would succeed—and return.

He entered the quonset-like barracks building and strode down the hall toward the quarters allotted him and his crew. As he opened the door he could hear the clink of glasses.

"Well, just in time to drown your sorrows, Captain. We're drinking to tomorrow—and hoping it won't be our last!"

George Carter grinned at him as he closed the door. He nudged the shorter man beside him. "Come on, Ned, pour Rex a drink."

Blaine smiled at them in return. "Just one. Then we're going to catch up on some sack time."

Carter grimaced. "Sleep? Why waste the last few hours we're sure about! Not me, Captain!"

Blaine took the drink that Ned

Kline handed him. He saw the radio man shrug toward Carter. Blaine nodded and looked back at George Carter. Was the man showing a case of nerves? The first sign of a breakdown?

"You're not afraid, are you George?" Blaine asked quietly as he lifted the glass to his lips.

Carter's laughter sounded forced. "Afraid? Me, Rex? You ought to know better than that!"

Blaine's eyes fixed steadily upon Carter's florid features. "I know you've got as much guts as any man, George. That's why I picked you for this assignment. When I asked if you were afraid I meant of something we don't know about. After all, there's a chance we won't come back either."

Blaine had planned his words carefully. There was no sense in dodging the issue with either of his men, he knew. And there was still time to get a replacement if it was necessary.

Carter's face sobered. "Maybe I have gotten a little edgy, Rex. I've been wondering if man isn't being told politely he has no business out in space. And I don't mean by any physical force either..."

Blaine nodded. "I see. Religion has finally caught up with you. Well, maybe it's a good thing."

Carter flushed in embarrassment. "There's nothing wrong in that."

Ned Kline smiled. "Of course not, George. As long as we don't let it interfere with our work. Hell, I've been thinking of a few choice prayers myself."

Some of the tenseness left Carter's face and he grinned. "You praying? That's a laugh. I've heard everything now!"

Blaine walked over to a bunk bed set against the far wall and sat down. "Well, now that we've got the fear of the Almighty accounted for, what about the ship?"

Ned Kline put his glass down on a table. "We made a final check while you were in the Commandant's office. Everything is all set."

Blaine nodded. "There's no possibility of the radio failing?"

"Not a chance. I'll—"

His voice broke off suddenly as there was a thudding sound in the hall outside the room.

BLAINE got to his feet quickly, a frown on his face. He heard Carter exclaim: "What the devil was that?"

As the man spoke, there was another sound. A low stifled groan. And with the groan the thudding came again beyond the door.

Blaine stepped forward quickly, putting his glass on the table as he hurried to the door.

He pulled it open.

In the dim light of the barracks hall he saw the huddled figure of a man on the floor. He was lying face down, his clothing torn and ragged. Blood was flowing down his right arm and there was a trail of it on the wood floor.

Blaine stood staring down at the figure in shocked surprise. Then he was aware of Ned Kline standing beside him.

"Good Lord, Captain, what's happened?"

"I don't know, Ned. Come on, let's get him into the room."

They reached down and grabbed the man under his armpits and lifted him from the floor. It was then that Rex Blaine saw that the figure was holding something tightly clenched in the fingers of his right hand. It seemed to be a crystal globe of some kind. As they moved him, groans slipped from the man's lips.

"Come on, into the room, quick!"

Blaine held on to the man's left arm while Ned Kline supported him

from the opposite side. Together they half-dragged him back into the room.

"Over on the bed!" Blaine snapped. He was aware suddenly that George Carter was standing in their way, his mouth open in astonishment. "George, out of the way!"

But Carter didn't move. Suddenly he lifted a shaking finger and pointed at the man. His voice came with an overtone of incredulous fear.

"Rex—that man—it can't be! That's John Masters!"

Blaine almost dropped the heavy figure. For an instant his eyes flicked over to Ned Kline. The radio man's features had grown suddenly pale, for he was staring down at the bowed head of the man they supported. Almost fearfully Rex Blaine looked down.

He could never have mistaken that profile. The long, thin, angular features. Even with the smear of blood covering them he knew that George Carter was right. It was impossible. It was beyond the realm of reason. But it was true. The man he and Ned were holding was the lost space commander, John Masters!

"Merciful God!" Ned Kline's voice was awed. "George is right, Rex. It is Masters!"

Blaine nodded numbly and motioned once again to the bed. "Let's get him over there!"

They moved swiftly then. Carter came up behind them and lifted the injured man's feet on to the bunk as they slipped a pillow under his head. It was then that Blaine saw the searing burns that slashed diagonally across the man's face. Burns so terrible that the flesh was already blackened.

He stared down at the figure, his mind refusing to believe what he saw. And as he looked the man's lips parted and another low groan slipped from them. Behind him, he heard Ned Kline exclaim.

"He needs a doctor—in a hurry!"

Blaine nodded. He half turned. "Get over to headquarters building, Ned. Notify emergency. And," he hesitated a moment, "get Fallenger over here. But don't say a word to anyone else. Understand?"

Kline nodded and hurried from the room. A moment later Blaine heard the door at the end of the hall open and slam shut.

Then he turned back to the injured man. "George, get a drink, quick."

CARTER moved away from the bunk and Blaine leaned over the still figure. The man's lips were parted slightly, and a thin trickle of blood was running from them down the seared chin. A gurgle of sound issued from deep in Masters' throat and his fingers, clenching the strange globe-like object, tried to move upward but fell again limply upon the bed.

"Masters! John! Can you hear me!" Blaine clipped the words out.

The man moved feebly once again, as if he were struggling to lift his consciousness from some deep abyss.

"Give him this, Rex." George Carter's voice sounded in Blaine's ear. He turned and took the partly filled glass of amber fluid and turned again to the man on the bed.

Gently he raised Masters' head from the pillow and put the edge of the glass at his lips. Slowly he tilted the glass until the fluid ran into the unconscious man's mouth.

There was a sputtering gasp from the unconscious figure as the whiskey ran down his throat. Then suddenly he groaned deeply and his eyes flickered open.

Blaine's lips were tight as he stared into those eyes. He saw pain there. A pain so terrible that death would have seemed a blessing. And he saw fear. A strange fear, deep and incomprehensible. And, finally, there

was recognition.

Masters' eyes flickered and fastened upon Blaine's. The man's lips moved in a tremor and Blaine lifted the glass to them again.

"Here, John, take another swallow. Easy now."

This time the whiskey went down easier. Masters coughed as he swallowed, and strength seemed to pour back into his tortured face. Then his voice came. Low, distant, pain-wracked.

"Rex—thank God—I made it..."

"Easy, John. Don't try to talk now. You need your strength..."

Masters' head shook feebly. "I don't have...much time. Lura's men nearly trapped me—got away just as—their heat rays reached me..."

Blaine stared at the man in stupefaction. He knew that at any other time, if it had been any other person, he would have thought the man delirious. But this was too bizarre. Appearing as if from the dead, John Masters lay before him now, his face and body horribly burned by some fantastic weapon or source of power. As Blaine stared at the man, he knew that Masters was right. He didn't have much time.

"All right, John. Talk as much as you can. What happened to you? Where have you been? What—"

"The wall—Rex...Space...Beyond the wall...Thallom..."

The words came out in staccato sounds, seemingly unconnected. Blaine listened to them desperately, trying to piece them together.

"What wall, Masters? What about space? And what is Thallom?"

Masters tried desperately to get up to a sitting position on the bed. Blaine half-lifted and supported him. "Space—impenetrable—except beyond—Saturn—channel through the wall—to Thallom...Warn Earth—tenth planet. Lura's science superior..."

Masters' voice choked off and Blaine frowned as he sought to make sense out of the man's words.

"Try to be clearer, John. What is Thallom? Is it another world—a tenth planet in our solar system?"

Masters' head bobbed weakly. Suddenly he raised the strange globe-like mechanism in a trembling hand. Blaine saw that its surface was clear and smooth on one side, the glass, or whatever material it was composed of, opaque. On the other side was a series of multi-colored buttons. As he looked at them Masters depressed one of them with a trembling finger.

Almost at once the opacity of the globe vanished. In its place was a shimmering light. And then the light settled down into a pattern and he suddenly seemed to be looking into a three-dimensional screen. His breath caught in his throat as he seemed to be staring down at a fantastic city nestled in a huge valley between two jagged mountains.

"Thallom—Lura's city..."

Blaine tore his eyes away from the scene and spoke desperately to the injured man. "Masters! How did you get here! How!"

Masters clenched the globe tightly in his fingers. "Teleported—stole tele-globe from Tagath..."

Blaine reached out for it, tried to take it from Masters' fingers. The man pulled away savagely. And Blaine's hand accidentally depressed one of the other buttons by the sudden movement.

THE GLOBE sparkled with light and suddenly another scene sprang into three-dimensional focus. Blaine found himself staring into a fantastic room. Rich draperies flanked floor-to-ceiling windows at one end. The floor itself seemed to be some gleaming metal of a splendid mosaic pattern. Ultra-modern sections of furniture

were set at various points in the room. But it was not at the furniture or the windows or the floor that Blaine was staring. His gaze was riveted to a great screen set in one wall and the woman who sat before that screen, her fingers poised over a series of controls.

She was the most beautiful woman Blaine had ever seen. Her body was clad in a revealing gown of shimmering material. Her breasts, barely concealed by the gown, rose and fell in a supple motion. Her hair was long and golden and fastened at the nape of her neck by an emerald-studded net. But it was her eyes that held him.

They were wide and deep and green. The eyes of a cat. Sleek, piercing, and beautifully evil. As he looked at her the screen before her suddenly flashed into light and a scene registered. Blaine stared in amazement at himself and John Masters—exactly as they were in the room. He could even make out Carter standing in the background, his eyes wide with astonishment.

As he looked the eyes of the woman met his. There was a flash of sudden surprise in her gaze. Then her gaze had swept past him and centered on Masters.

The injured man let out a sharp cry as if he had first become aware of what had happened. "Lura!"

And as Blaine watched, the woman's eyes filled with a triumphant hate. Her voice seemed to come out of nowhere filled with a rich, passionate anger.

"You thought you could escape me, John Masters! But you will not tell your tale among Earthmen! You shall die here on Thallom!"

Even as she spoke her fingers reached for a set of controls beneath the great screen. And John Masters fumbled weakly with the globe in his hands.

"No!—You will not take me back!"

Blaine shot to his feet from the bunk. His mind failed to grasp what was occurring; he knew only that somehow that globe must be destroyed. He reached out and tried to tear it from Masters' hands. But the injured man showed a sudden spurt of strength. His arm shot out and pushed Blaine roughly. "Get away—Blaine!"

It was a warning cry, and Blaine, not expecting the move, toppled backward against Carter. Even as he was shoved off balance he heard the door at the entrance to the barracks open and feet pounding in the hall.

It happened so fast he wasn't sure he saw himself what occurred then. One moment he was trying to regain his balance, and watching the globe in Masters' hand. He saw the woman Masters had called Lura twist a dial. The scene exploded into a blaze of light. At the same time he heard a fearful scream from Masters.

And then Blaine's mouth dropped open in amazement.

John Masters had vanished.

He heard George Carter cry out, "He's gone! Captain—he's *vanished!*"

Blaine sprang forward to the bunk. His hands searched the rumpled surface of the bed as if he expected to encounter an invisible solid there. But there was nothing. Nothing but the rumpled bedding where a moment before John Masters had lain.

"What's going on here?"

Blaine turned away from the bed to stare at Frank Fallenger entering the room. Behind him came Ned Kline, and in the hall he could see the white-coated figure of one of the base medicos.

It was Carter who muttered numbly: "He vanished, sir! Right before our eyes! That woman twisted a dial or something and—he vanished!"

Fallenger stared from the mechanic to Blaine. Blaine nodded. "That's right, Frank, I swear to God it's right. Masters was here—on this bunk only a few moments ago!"

Fallenger's lips were grim. "Now look here, Rex. If this is some kind of a joke!"

"I tell you it's no joke! Masters was here! I saw him—spoke to him!" And as rapidly as he could Blaine outlined what had happened. As he spoke he saw the disbelief grow in the Director's eyes as he looked from Blaine to the bunk and back again.

"And you're trying to tell me that a man who vanished months ago suddenly appears here on the Moon—in the hall outside your room? What is this, mass hypnosis? Are you sure you men haven't got a bad case of nerves?"

BLAINE tightened his lips and walked to the door of the room. He pointed to the floor outside. "If it's nerves, Frank, how do you explain this?"

Fallenger looked down at the floor of the hall. In the light from the room a small pool of blood glistened. Slowly the Director raised his eyes to Blaine. There was a grimness in them now.

"If this is true, do you realize what it means?"

Blaine nodded slowly. "It means that every ship that has left the Moon for one of the planets has been captured or destroyed by an intelligent power."

"It also means war, Rex. One of the planets in our system is highly advanced—apparently more advanced than we are. The question is, which one?"

It was Carter who broke in suddenly. "But, sir, Masters kept mentioning a tenth planet—a world named Thallom!"

Fallenger shook his head. "There is no tenth planet in the solar system. You can't hide a planet."

As the Director spoke, Blaine's mind raced. He remembered what Masters had said about a wall in space. Or was it—beyond the wall... A wall in space...

"Maybe a planet could be hidden, behind a wall..." He spoke the words to himself.

"What was that?" Fallenger asked.

Blaine looked at him, shrugged. "Nothing. I was thinking out loud." But he saw Fallenger eyeing him thoughtfully.

"I'll have to make a report of this to Earth," Fallenger said suddenly. "We'll have to change our plans. Organize an exploratory fleet, armed with the best weapons we have."

Blaine stepped close to him. "Sir, you're not thinking of cancelling our flight?"

Fallenger looked questioningly at him. "I can't very well ask any man to take a risk such as this. Besides, this is a matter for the military."

Blaine shook his head. "It's less of a risk now than it was before. At least we know we're facing an intelligent force somewhere in space. Now, we know what we're looking for. Before, we were shooting blindly. That's why the other ships—Masters' included—didn't come back."

"You mean you want to continue as planned?"

"I think it's the only way, Frank. Besides, when we return you'll be able to turn in a complete report, and if we're lucky we may have definite information."

Fallenger looked skeptical. He turned suddenly to Carter and Kline. "And what do you men think about going now?"

Carter's florid features were eager now. "You couldn't keep me off that ship, sir. Besides, if we can find this

Thallom, we may be able to find Masters..."

"Carter's right, sir," Ned Kline added. "And I agree with Captain Blaine. I want to go."

"I don't know.... This may be contrary to regulations now that we know what we do."

Blaine cut in. "You're forgetting about Masters and the other men who went before him, aren't you Frank? Maybe the regulations owe them something."

Fallenger bit his lip at the sharpness in Blaine's words. Finally he nodded. "All right, Rex. I suppose you're right. We'll carry out our plan on schedule. But remember, take no unnecessary chances."

Fallenger turned then and left the room. Blaine closed the door and looked at Carter and Kline. "Well, we're going. How do you men feel?"

"I feel like having a damned strong drink," Carter said heavily.

"We're going all right, but where?" Ned Kline stared at them thoughtfully. "In some ways we know even less now than we did before."

As Carter poured each of them a drink Blaine shook his head. "No, Ned, we've got a course. Masters mentioned Saturn. That's where we're headed."

"And from there?" the radio man asked.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Blaine lifted his glass in a toast. "To a brave man: John Masters."

They drank silently. And Rex Blaine saw once again a strangely piercing pair of green eyes staring into his. He wondered if he would ever see them in person....

"BLASTOFF minus sixty."

Rex Blaine sat tensely before the controls of the rocket ship, his eyes fastened to the visiscreen. He

heard Ned Kline announce the sixty-second mark. One more minute. Sixty seconds that were now passing like an eternity.

In the screen he could see the small group of men gathered near the headquarters building below them. Frank Fallenger would be down there watching and waiting. The only other Earthman who knew the real and dangerous truth about their flight. It was a comforting thought, Blaine realized. For even if they didn't come back there would be someone left to warn Earth.

"Blastoff minus thirty."

Ned Kline's voice droned monotonously behind him. Blaine's fingers tensed over the controls. In the screen he saw the roof of the airlock slide back, exposing the rocket to the vacuum of space and the stars.

"Blastoff minus ten."

"Prepare to blast!" Blaine's voice answered, and automatically he checked the acceleration belt fastening him to his seat. It was in order.

"Blastoff!"

Blaine's fingers depressed the firing studs. There was a deep rumble of power in the rear of the rocket. The metal ship shuddered in its cradle and in the screen Blaine could see the red glare of the rocket flames illuminating the Lunar Base.

Then suddenly the roar of sound grew to a crescendo and Blaine felt himself pressed back against his seat with a terrific force. The Lunar Base fled beneath them and the ship shot into the blackness of space, away from man....

FRANK FALLENGER depressed the intercom switch on his desk. "Parkins, I'm leaving for Earth shortly. I'll report to HQ there. Take over the Base until I return. Keep Blaine and his crew in contact at all times."

The voice of his assistant came back

crisply. "Right, sir. Shall I see you off?"

"That won't be necessary. I'll take one of the private ships. That is all."

He switched off the set and leaned back in his chair. He drummed his fingers together for a moment and a look of satisfaction crossed his features. Then suddenly, he leaned forward, opened a drawer in the desk and removed a strange object to the top of the desk.

It was a small globe-like object, opaque, with a series of multi-colored buttons set in one side. A smile pulled at Fallenger's lips as he picked the globe up and turned it in his hands.

He depressed one of the colored buttons.

* The globe sprang into glaring light and then a scene grew clear in a three-dimensional focus. He was staring into a lavishly furnished room, draperies running from floor to ceiling at the windows, the floor a strange metallic mosaic. Seated before a large screen, staring back at his image, a regal woman of golden hair and sensuous green eyes.

Standing beside the screen, around her, were a number of guards. Between them they held a limp figure, its head bowed, its features showing deep, terrible burns.

"Tagath reporting," Fallenger said crisply.

The woman nodded. "I have been worrying, Tagath. What of the Earthmen this John Masters contacted?"

"I thought it best that I not attempt to kill them here, Queen Lura. That would have aroused suspicions. I have sent them on their journey into space. Their ship has just left the Moon."

The woman's beautiful features glowed triumphantly. "And the tall handsome one..."

Fallenger frowned at the inflection in her voice. "He is dangerous, but we will take care of him when we bring

his ship to Thallom. I shall be there personally to attend to him, my Queen."

"You have prepared for your absence from Earth and its satellite?"

"All arrangements have been made," Fallenger replied. "And what of the Earthman, Masters?"

The features of Lura grew cold. "He shall pay for his escape, Tagath. And those who assisted him will be found and will pay also. The Earthman's death will be a warning to all of Thallom who dare to oppose me."

She arose from the controls of the screen and stepped in front of the guards holding the limp figure of the injured Earthman. Her hand lashed out in a stinging blow against Masters' face. The man stirred with pain as the wounds of his face opened and blood seeped from them.

"Prepare to die, Earthman. Just as all of your race shortly will feel the might of Lura!" Her voice was cold and merciless. She reached to one of the guards and took from him a silver weapon. She pointed the muzzle of the weapon at Masters and motioned the guards to stand aside. They did so and Masters sagged to the metallic floor. His pain-wracked eyes glared up at the woman and he fought his tortured body to his feet.

"I am not afraid to die—you will never defeat Earth—or men like Rex Blaine... He has seen you and is warned..."

Lura, Queen of Thallom, laughed in his face and depressed a firing stud in the weapon she held. A thin needle-ray of flame tore into Masters' body. He gave a single piercing shriek of agony and collapsed to the floor.

Lura held the weapon pointed at Masters' body, firing the sizzling rays into it until it was nothing but a smoking char of carbonized matter.

Then calmly she handed the weapon back to the guard and motioned to

the others. Their faces were stoic as they gathered up the still-smoking remains of what moments before had been a man. As they left the chamber she turned back to the screen.

"Thus shall all of Earth feel the power and might of Thallom!" Her eyes were wild with a savage light, and Fallenger's lips were tight with passion as he nodded.

"I shall come to attend to Blaine and his crew, my Queen."

Some of the fire left her eyes. There was a distant look in them now. "Yes, return to Thallom, Tagath, I have need of your services. There are traitors in our midst who thirst for revolt. They shall feel the heat of the ato-ray and the Arena even as the Earthmen shall!"

"I hear and obey, my queen," Fallenger replied.

His fingers lifted the globe from the desk and he depressed one of the multi-colored buttons. There was a flash of brilliant light from the globe and for a moment the area of the desk seemed hidden in its radiance. Traces of ozone filled the air.

Then, just as suddenly, the glare was gone.

The chair behind Fallenger's desk was empty.

He had vanished....

"I'VE GOT Lunar Base, Captain," Kline announced.

"Good, I'll take over," Blaine replied and switched on the radio control in front of him. "Hello, Luna. Blaine speaking. Is this the Director's office?"

The set crackled. Then: "Parkins, assistant Director, speaking. What is your position?"

Blaine frowned. "Is Director Fallenger there?"

The crackling of the set. "Fallenger has returned to Earth to report. He

contact with your flight. Report, please."

The frown grew on Blaine's face at this news. What could have been so important to make Fallenger leave for Earth? Somehow, Blaine felt, this was not right. Fallenger had been specific in his request that they keep in direct communication at all times. Fallenger, alone, on the Lunar Base, knew the gravity of the situation....

"Blaine reporting. We've crossed the orbit of Mars. Heading out toward Saturn."

He heard Parkins gasp. "But what were your orders, Captain Blaine? I thought Venus was to be the destination of your first run."

Blaine smiled to himself. Of course Parkins wouldn't know. And then the seriousness of the situation became more apparent to him. Without Fallenger on the other end he would have to use his own initiative. What had made Fallenger leave? Had he decided to report to the Council on Earth and send out a reconnaissance fleet? But no, that couldn't be true, because if Fallenger had done that he would have left orders for Blaine to return....

"I am following orders from the Director," Blaine replied to the Lunar Base. "I will keep in touch with you. That is all."

"Acknowledging." Parkins' voice came hesitantly. Then Blaine switched off the set.

Carter came forward in the small control room. The technician had a puzzled look on his florid features. "What was all that about, Captain? I thought Fallenger was going to be in touch with us personally."

Blaine nodded. "So did I. You know as much as I do right now."

Kline broke in, turning from his seat at the radio controls. "You told Parkins we were heading for Saturn. I

orders like that."

Blaine stared into the visiscreen at the blackness of space ahead. "That was my idea, Ned."

Carter snapped his fingers. "I remember! Masters said something about Saturn—and a wall in space!"

Blaine's eyes flicked to the technician briefly. "That's right, George. It isn't much to go on, but that's all we have. Whatever power Masters ran into had something to do with Saturn."

Ned Kline leaned forward, staring into the visiscreen. He pointed to a rapidly glowing ball in space surrounded with an aura of hazy rings.

"That's Saturn out there! If you're right we may be in a danger zone right now..."

Blaine studied the screen. Kline was right. They were approaching the ringed planet. He could see the hazy outline of the asteroid belts that girded the planet, whirling around it at fantastic speeds. A feeling of wariness gripped him. Was it possible that even now they were under the careful scrutiny of alien eyes? Were sensitive instruments plotting their course? What had Masters meant by a wall in space?

"By God, maybe Masters meant that Saturn was the base of an alien force!" Ned Kline sounded excited.

"I don't think so," Blaine clipped. "He mentioned a tenth planet beyond the wall."

"But that's impossible!" Carter said heavily. "If there was a tenth planet in the solar system we'd know about it."

Blaine's eyes were grim upon the fast-approaching planet Saturn. "We don't know what happened to the other space flights that left the Moon. Perhaps we don't know as much about our solar system as we think. Or maybe we know as much as this intelligent force wants us to know!"

Ned Kline pointed anxiously at the

planet Saturn. "There's something strange about that planet, Rex. What makes it glow like that? Look at those rings of asteroids!"

Blaine studied the scene closely.

—Yes, that was strange. A planet does not give off light; it only reflects it. Yet Saturn and its rings, under their close scrutiny now, seemed to be actually glowing. Blaine knew it could not be the reflection of the sun's rays. Sol was too distant to account for the amount of radiation present.

"Contact Lunar Base!" Blaine snapped.

KLINE twisted back to his radio controls and began sending out the call signal. "Lunar Base, attention! Interplanetary expedition reporting. Answer!"

There was a crackle from the receiver. Finally the answer came, distant, but clear. "Lunar Base, Parkins speaking. Report."

Blaine nodded to Kline and switched on his own set. "Hello, Parkins. We are approaching Saturn. Planet and asteroid rings have strange glow. Seems as if there is an aura of force emanating from the world. Will proceed with caution."

As he spoke, Blaine adjusted the controls of the ship and set their course in a wide swing of the planet that shortly would take them to the opposite side of the world.

"Keep in contact, Captain Blaine," Parkins' voice came over the set.

Behind him, Blaine heard George Carter gasp. "Captain—look at that asteroid belt!"

Blaine looked. What he saw made his lips grow to a thin tight line. In the whirling rings of millions of asteroids a few would be thrown from the orbit they followed periodically. And as he looked he saw a large chunk of space rock hurtle from the orbit of the planet and shoot through space

in the general course of direction they themselves followed.

Blaine hit the retard jets hard and felt the ship respond. The asteroid shot past them at tremendous speed, to hurtle into the blackness of space beyond Saturn.

"That was close—" Carter started to breathe easier behind Blaine, but his words cut off in mid-sentence.

Blaine gripped the controls in amazement as he saw the asteroid suddenly explode in a dazzling flare of brilliant light ahead of them. It was over in the twinkling of a second. Then there was only the blackness of space.

"My God—that damned hunk of rock exploded!" Carter's voice held awe.

But something clicked in Blaine's mind suddenly. He remembered what Masters had said about a wall in space. A wall... "That asteroid didn't explode!" Blaine clipped out. "It struck something!"

"Hello, Blaine... Parkins speaking. What's happening? Report!"

Blaine threw full retard to the jets and turned the ship from its course. He felt beads of perspiration rise on his forehead. Grimly he realized that but for a freak accident their ship would have hurtled into whatever field of force lay out beyond Saturn. Instead of that chunk of space rock exploding it might have been them...

"Hello, Parkins, hello—" Blaine started to speak. But he heard only a sharp crackle and sputtering from the radio. He turned swiftly to Kline. "Ned, what's the hell's wrong with the set?"

The radio man was working frantically with the controls. He looked anxiously back at Blaine. "I don't know—the set's working perfectly but I can't raise Lunar Base. We were cut off!"

"Cut off?" Blaine snapped. "Cut

through to them! We're jetting out of here—"

The snap and crackle of the radio set rose in volume. "I can't get through!" Kline shouted. "There's a force field cutting us out!"

Blaine nodded. "All right then, hold on. We're going to take full jet away!"

He punched the controls of the ship and for a moment the ship responded with a surge of power. The nose of the rocket began to turn away from Saturn and head back into the solar system. Then just as suddenly the power went dead.

Blaine swore and worked at the controls. But the ship failed to respond.

"Carter! See what's gone wrong with the power!"

THE TECHNICIAN hurried from the control room. Blaine worked frantically with the dead controls, throwing in the emergency drive. But that too failed. He heard Ned Kline's worried voice at the radio controls.

"They must have spotted us, Rex! Whatever power they've used to cut out our radio signals must have been used on our jets! We've come into a trap!"

Carter came running back into the control room. His face was beaded with nervous sweat. "The whole damned power system is dead! I can't do a thing back there!"

Blaine sank heavily back against his seat. He turned slowly to them, his eyes grim. "Well, it looks like we went too far. We're caught, just as Masters and the others must have been."

Carter wiped his face nervously. "We're like a sitting duck out here! All they have to do is throw one of those space rocks at us or—"

"Or push us into whatever destroyed that space rock, is that what you mean?" Blaine finished for him.

Carter nodded. Blaine shook his head. "I don't think so. Whatever force is behind this could easily have left us crash into that energy field out there and we'd have ended up like that asteroid. No, I think they've got other plans..."

Even as Blaine spoke the ship gave a sudden lurch. Blaine grabbed the controls with a desperate prayer. But they remained dead. And yet, he knew, the ship was moving.

Without a sound, with no sense of motion except for that brief lurch, the rocket was accelerating. As Blaine watched the visiscreen he saw their course change and the nose of the ship head back for the planet Saturn and the asteroid belt.

"We're moving!" Carter's voice was edged with fear.

Blaine himself felt a touch of dread. It was uncanny, eerie, being guided by an invisible hand, as easily and surely as if they were but a pawn upon a gigantic chessboard. He saw once again in his mind's eye that evil, beautiful face he had seen in the globe Masters had held. Those deep hypnotic green eyes. The sensuous face and supple beauty that went with them. And a name. Lura... Anger boiled in Blaine. He hated that face. He hated the smug assurance and triumphant beauty of it. He remembered the cry of fear Masters had given. And now...

Now they were moving faster, ever faster, without sense of sound or motion toward the glowing planet ahead. Blaine's fists clenched as he watched, helpless to do anything. If this course kept up in minutes they would crash into the asteroid ring. Was that the plan?

Even as the thought crossed his mind the ship veered in its course and slewed to the right of the asteroid ring. As they shot by it one of the jagged rocks broke from its orbit and

distant reaches of the void. But, as before, suddenly the asteroid exploded into a brief flare of intense light. As if it had struck an impenetrable wall and been atomized instantaneously.

"We're going to strike that energy field!" Ned Kline shouted close to Blaine's ear.

Blaine could only stare ahead in mute tension. He waited for the impact, the shattering explosion that would snuff their lives out in a burst of disrupted energy. Now—now—*now!*

Then their ship was past Saturn, past the whirling rings of asteroids.

"We went *through* it!" George Carter breathed heavily.

Rex Blaine tensed at the visiscreen. For he saw something there now that he had not seen before. And what he saw brought a startled cry from his lips.

"*Look!*"

It was a world. A world of a vast size. A planet that overshadowed Saturn and dwarfed it to insignificance. A great body in space that must have been equal in size to Jupiter. They hovered over it, rushing ever closer.

Blaine's mind refused to believe what his eyes registered. He knew it was impossible that this great planet could have been on the other side of Saturn and invisible to their eyes. Saturn, a planet itself, seemed to be but a satellite!

Blaine was aware that Kline and Carter were staring in mute astonishment along with him. There were no words to exchange. Their faces showed the incredulous fascination that his must have shown. Finally it was Blaine who spoke.

"This is what Masters was trying to tell us about—the tenth planet, *Thal-lom!* A world invisible to us on Earth, surrounded by an impenetrable

now. A man-made wall. We're up against a science that makes our own seem ridiculous. God only knows what is next...."

As if in answer to his words the ship slashed down into the atmosphere of the great planet. They could make out great seas and continents now. For all its great size it seemed capable of supporting life. But for the shape of the seas and continents Blaine might have been approaching the surface of his own world.

Sound came to them now. Blaine could feel the rush of air as they descended toward the surface of the planet, and moments later they could make out a gleaming, vast city set between two jagged mountains in a verdant valley. Even as he looked at it and heard the men beside him exclaim, the visiscreen lit up.

He saw a beautiful face upon it. The face of the woman he had seen in the globe! Her eyes were mocking, laughing, taunting him. He reached savagely for the control to turn off the screen, but at the same time he saw the woman's hand touch a dial.

And from the city a bright purple lancet of light reached up into the sky and enveloped the ship.

Blaine felt a numbing shock. The air of the ship seemed to heat up and a loud hum lashed at his ears. Then his senses began to whirl and the numbness increased. He heard Carter cry out in fear.

Then darkness swept over him in a swirling roar.

BLAINE came to with the feeling that a million needles were tearing at his body. He gradually became aware that it was the return of feeling to his numbed nerves. His eyes prickled with little daggers of pain as his sight cleared. The first thing he saw was a long expanse of metallic flooring. He then became aware that his

surface of the metal. The floor seemed to spread for blocks. But close to him his vision was obscured by a line of boot-clad feet. He raised his eyes and gazed upon a row of strangely clad guards, each man holding a silver-barreled weapon.

As his strength came back he was aware that somebody had just pulled a hypodermic needle from his arm. The jab of pain as the needle left him brought him to his knees.

"So you finally came out of the paral-ray, Blaine."

The voice and the words registered on his ears. He knew somehow that the voice was familiar. He lifted himself to his feet then and swayed for a moment while his vision steadied.

He looked into the face of Frank Fallenger not five feet away.

"Frank! My God, where am I?"

Fallenger's face was impassive. Only then did Blaine note that the man's clothing had changed. He was wearing a close-fitting metallic garment and a slash of color ran diagonally across his chest. A short ceremonial sword was held in a short scabbard at his waist. His feet, too, were booted like those in the line of guards behind him. But in his hand he held only the empty hypo.

"No, Blaine, you are not mad. But neither are you on Luna or Earth. You have been brought to Thallom...."

"Thallom? Frank, this is impossible—what are you doing here?"

Fallenger's features inclined to something behind Blaine. His voice was reverent as he intoned: "I adopted the name of Fallenger only to be among your kind, Earthman. I am Tagath, adviser to the Queen Lura, ruler of all Thallom."

Blaine, his mind spinning at the man's words, turned slowly.

He was facing a throne. He stood at the base of a tier of steps leading

studded chair of state was the woman of the globe. She was clad in a rich gown, cut low on breasts that rose and fell in supple, sensual movements. Her rich golden hair was held in place by a diamond tiara and her bare arms rested on the arms of the throne. Her eyes were fastened steadily upon him, and there was no emotion in them. She seemed to be studying him, weighing him.

"So this is the famed Earth Captain, Rex Blaine." There was a note of contempt in her words that brought a flush to Blaine's face.

"And you are Lura, Queen of Thallom. What have you done to my men?"

The full lips of Lura parted in an amused smile. "The Captain's crew is quite well taken care of. He need not concern himself with their safety—only his own."

The threat in her words was not veiled and Blaine's lips curled. "It is easy to threaten a man who stands before you weaponless. The Queen Lura shows great courage."

Her cheeks flamed at his words and he heard the mutter of anger from the guards behind him.

FALLENGER suddenly moved up beside him. There was cold anger on the man's features. "Watch your tongue, Blaine. If I had my way you'd be burned to a crisp just as Masters was."

"Masters?" Blaine felt a hot anger sear him. "What have you done to him?"

Fallenger sneered openly. "He is dead. Just as you will be, shortly."

Lura spoke sharply from her throne. "Hold your tongue, Tagath. I will decide who will die and when!"

Blaine turned back to her. "I demand to know why I am brought here. And what is this traitor Earthman, Fallenger, doing here?"

Tagath, Rex Blaine. He is not an Earthman. He is of Thallom. I sent him to Earth. I have learned much of your planet from him. My plans are now nearly complete, my laboratories freshly stocked with the best of your technical minds. My space armada awaits the signal to flash down upon your world in conquest. It is time, as soon your race might learn the secret of the wall in space.

"Tagath would have me kill you. And perhaps his is the wise choice. But I have a use for you and can promise much in return. You are a space captain. I need trained men to fly my armada. Many of your Earthmen are already indoctrinated to the wonders of Thallom. They who tried to reach the stars were met just as you were. They now serve Lura. I give you your choice. Serve me along with them or—"

She left the words hanging, but Blaine did not need a further explanation.

"You have your answer!" he snapped. "The only service I'll give you is the same you gave John Masters! And I'll live to see this traitor to Earth, here, pay for his treason!"

"Brave words, Earthman. But let us not talk of hate. We have not shown you how we can welcome men to Thallom." Lura's tone changed abruptly to one of soft invitation. She clapped her hands sharply.

Blaine frowned but continued to glare at her. Then from behind the throne a door opened and a line of girls entered. Each carried a silver tray upon which stood a flask and filled glass. The glasses contained a dark amber fluid. One of them stopped before Lura and knelt. Another walked down and bent one knee toward Tagath. A third came slowly toward Blaine.

He stared at her. She wore a simple two-piece garment, blouse and

ing white thigh showed in the break of the skirt. Her hair was dark and full and rich. But it was her face that held Blaine. It was soft and smooth and held a quiet dignity that he did not expect to find in the features of a slave girl. Her eyes were a deep blue and they held his for a moment before she bowed her head slightly before him, raising the tray.

Blaine hesitated. He saw that Lura and Tagath had both taken glasses and were waiting expectantly for him. Slowly he reached out and took his glass from the tray. He saw Lura raise hers in a toast; was aware that Tagath was watching him tensely. And a warning bell rang somewhere in Blaine's mind.

The slave girl was looking at him again and starting to back away. His eyes caught and held hers and he saw a pleading look in them. One of fear and warning. And almost imperceptibly he saw her lips move. He barely caught the whispered word: "Drugged!" and she had backed away.

Blaine stiffened. His eyes shot over to Tagath. The man he had known as Fallenger was staring in wrath at the slave girl. Tagath tore his eyes from her and glared at Blaine.

"Well, Blaine, the queen Lura waits upon you!"

With a deliberate movement Blaine dropped the glass to the metal floor. There was the clink of broken glass and the amber liquid spilled out.

"I don't like my drinks drugged!" Blaine snapped.

As the words left his lips he heard the swift intake of breath from the slave girl, and he knew instant regret. For by them he had exposed the girl who had risked her life to warn him.

Tagath turned wrathfully upon her. His arm lashed out and caught her full across the face. Her head snapped

she fell to the floor. "You will die for your treason, Noreen!"

Tagath lashed out with his foot and as his boot neared the cowering body of the girl, Blaine acted.

He lunged forward and caught Tagath off-balance. The force of his body carried the man backward, to crash to the floor at the feet of the shouting guards. Blaine twisted away from the fallen man and caught the leg of the closest guard. He wrenched sharply and the man screamed as he fell upon Tagath.

THEN BLAINE was on his feet. He saw the nearest guard frantically trying to bring his weapon to bear on him, but before the man could aim Blaine sent a fist smashing into his mouth. The man rocked backward as Tagath regained his feet.

He smashed into Tagath, sending him reeling with a hard kick to his groin. Tagath let out a bellow of pain and screamed, "Guards! Kill him!"

But Blaine was not an easy target. He swung around and dove headlong at the next man rushing in. The guard did not expect the sudden attack and sprawled, carrying Blaine with him. Then as he fought to regain his feet Blaine heard a shrill command from the throne.

"Don't kill him! I want him alive!"

Blaine laughed harshly and grabbed for the silver weapon the man beneath him held. His fingers closed around the weapon and he wrenched it free. Hope sprang in Blaine now. If he could use it fast enough...

He rolled free of the fallen guard and felt swiftly for the operating mechanism of the weapon. His finger closed around a snub trigger. But even as he aimed at the rushing group of guards still on their feet, he knew he was too late.

A half dozen lances of bright yel-

body. He heard the slave girl scream in fear and in a brief flash saw one of the guards smashing the butt of his weapon at the girl.

It was the last thing he saw. His body shrieked in protest against the rays that tore into it. A paralysis gripped him and he dropped his own weapon. Then merciful darkness closed over him and he fell as from a great height. . . .

AWARENESS came back to Blaine with the tingling of a myriad needles in his brain. His body protested against the return to life of its nerves, and he felt the blood pound in his veins.

Then, strangely, he felt a soothing coolness sweep across his brow. With it the painful return to consciousness seemed to ease. His eyes flickered open and he tried to focus his gaze.

Again the coolness caressed his brow and he saw suddenly that it was a hand resting lightly on his forehead. Alarm coursed through him at the cool touch and he tried to force his weakened muscles to respond. Then a soft voice reached his ears.

"You fought bravely, Earthman. The Targal, my father himself, would not have made a more noble effort."

Blaine looked into the face of the beautiful slave girl whom Fallenger had called Noreen. Her fingers continued to caress his brow and he lay unmoving under the pleasant contact of her flesh to his. Then her eyes met his and her hand left his forehead. A flush covered her face, matching the red welt that Fallenger's blow had left upon her right cheek.

"... You are awakened."

Blaine sat up slowly, staring about him. He was lying on a simple cot of straw with a blanket as the only covering. The walls were a cold and ugly limestone and there was no window. Across from where he sat a metal door provided the only opening to the

room. It was closed. But for the small barred window-opening set high in the door, there would have been no illumination. Soft yellow light streamed into the cell from somewhere outside.

"Where are we, Noreen?" Blaine uttered her name and glanced again at the girl. She had moved away from the cot, and the flush still remained on her cheeks.

"We are beneath the palace of Lura, in the dungeons. Tagath himself brought us here."

"Tagath..." Blaine breathed the name as if it were a curse. And then the full realization of what had happened came back to his mind. He looked at the girl with pity in his eyes. "I am sorry, Noreen. I betrayed you when you tried to help me. I would gladly have taken the drug, whatever it was, to have saved you from this. . . ."

Her eyes glowed with silent thanks at his words. "I am glad I tried to help you, Rex Blaine. I knew you were brave and honest from the moment I saw them take you from your ship and into Lura's palace. I vowed then I would try to help you, just as I tried to aid your brother Earthman, John Masters. I failed as well with him. . . . I am sorry."

Blaine stiffened at mention of Masters' name. "You knew Masters? Tell me—"

The girl shrugged her slim bare shoulders hopelessly. "I helped Masters escape the robot-labs. I stole the tele-globe and gave it to Masters. He was to return to your planet and warn your people of Lura's evil plans in this solar system. But Masters was discovered before he could use the transmuting powers of the globe. Tagath's men burned him terribly before he could escape. I thought even then he had succeeded. But Lura brought him back... and you know what happened to him. . . ."

Blaine nodded dumbly. Yes, he knew

what had happened to Masters, and his lips grew grim at the thought. But there were so many things he didn't understand. So many things he had to know.

"What is this evil plan you speak of, Noreen? And what do you mean when you say 'this solar system'?"

THE GIRL folded her hands in her lap as she knelt on the stone floor beside Blaine. Her sweet features became set in a hard cast as she replied.

"Our planet, Thallom, is no child of your sun-star, Sol. We have traveled many billions of miles from the dead star of our own system. The rulers of Thallom foresaw the death of our own sun and they wisely provided for it. We could have migrated to another world, it is true. But Thallom is a great planet, capable of supporting life as we knew and loved it. So our scientists perfected the negative energy drive and moved our planet out into space.

"For countless generations we have traveled through the void thus, stopping in a solar system only long enough to recharge our reservoirs with energy from some uninhabitable world, such as your planet Saturn is in this system. Right now we are drawing tremendous stores of negative energy from that barren world."

Blaine nodded in amazement as he remembered the way Saturn had glowed as they approached it. He listened again as the girl continued to speak, but this time her voice held bitterness and regret.

"Through all these years upon years our people never once usurped from another race anything that belonged to them. We came and went as quickly as we could, pausing only to restock our source of power. But then came Lura and Tagath. They caused a revolt among our people and took over the government, proclaiming themselves as 'head' Under Lura's rule.

which she holds through control of the Sacred Robots of Law, all of Thallom is in virtual slavery, although our people do not realize it. They do her bidding because they think it is the Law of our Ancients, guarded and proclaimed by the Sacred Robot who has been entrusted with its keeping. But the Great Book of Law has been changed. Lura and Tagath have inserted a page that our Ancients never would have sanctioned.

"The Law is our religion and we abide by it faithfully and without question. It teaches benevolence and kindness and friendship to all living things. But not the law of Lura and Tagath. It tells only of conquest and power and the superiority of Thallom over all worlds."

Her voice paused in its bitter narration, and Blaine frowned. "But how can the changing of a page in a book make your people respect this false law, Noreen?"

The girl sighed. "In all our cities on Thallom, in every home, in every place where our people meet, there are telescreens that are never turned off. On these screens the law is projected from the Chamber of the Sacred Robot deep within this palace. Our people do not know that the law has been changed by Lura and Tagath. They think it is but the wish and wisdom of our Ancients. They follow it and bow to Lura's will."

"But, Noreen, is there no way to change the law and show your people how Lura and Tagath have usurped the rule of Thallom?"

The girl shook her head slowly. "The only way is to gain entrance to the Sacred Chamber and destroy the false law Lura and Tagath created. But that is impossible because no man is allowed in the Chamber. The Sacred Robot would slay anyone who tried to enter."

"But you told me that Lura and Tagath had entered and changed the

Law," Blaine insisted.

"That is true," the girl replied, "but they turned off its power from deep within Thallom. The Robot is part of the energy field that drives our planet. They took control of the energy field and then entered the Sacred Chamber. When they left, the Law had been changed. The Robot continues to guard it."

Blaine reached down and lifted the girl from the floor and motioned her to sit beside him on the cot. She did so. He took her hand and held it firmly in his.

"Tell me now, Noreen, why is it that Lura and Tagath prey upon our solar system? And what is this wall in space that hides your world from ours?"

THE GIRL'S eyes showed a weary anger. "That is the terrible price my people have had to pay for Lura and Tagath's treachery, Rex Blaine. For Tagath tampered with the energy fields to produce the invisible wall of negative forces that now gird your system. This happened when I was but a child. Tagath sought to create a weapon out of the wonderful creation of our ancestors that allowed Thallom to move through space as if it were a ship instead of a great planet. And Tagath succeeded. But the men of Thallom have paid a great price for his success. We do not know what complex forces are utilized in the Power Tunnels that run inside our world, but Tagath's tampering with them had caused a change in the structure of our males.

"Men of Thallom can no longer reproduce. The genes of their bodies have been altered by the negative energies Tagath unleashed in the short space of a few years. Lura and Tagath realize this, although our people as yet do not know the full consequences. Thus it is that Lura and Tagath prey upon your planet. They will steal the

strongest, the most brilliant of your males to labor in our robot-labs where they are drugged to do the bidding of Lura and Tagath unquestioningly. Their minds will be utilized for the science and knowledge they possess, and their bodies to restock the population of Thallom with the will-less robot humans... just as your two crew members even now labor in the techno-labs...."

Blaine sat stunned by the horror of what the girl unfolded. "You mean that Kline and Carter are drugged, helpless...?"

She nodded. "Even as you will be, unless Tagath has convinced Lura that you must die. I do not know. For some reason she seems attracted to you..." "I would sooner die than have that devil-bitch make use of me!" Blaine swore harshly. He got to his feet and stared down at the girl. "But how do you, a slave girl, know all this, and why should you choose to fight against the power of Lura and Tagath?"

Noreen rose slowly from the cot and stood before him. Her breasts rose and fell in rapid emotion and the blouse she wore grew taut against her swell. Her head was raised proudly, and once again, as he had noted when she approached earlier bearing the tray and drugged drink, there was a dignity about her that no slave bearing could erase. Her eyes flashed now and her voice held a proud ring.

"The former ruler of Thallom was a great Targal. It was he whom Lura and Tagath slew to usurp command of my people. The Targal who was rightful head of Thallom by his birthright. When they slew the Targal they also killed my father, for they were one and the same."

Blaine stared hard at her. "Then you are the rightful ruler of Thallom?" he asked incredulously.

"I am. And that is why Lura allows me to live. It gives her sadistic pleasure to have me as a slave to her

knowing full well that I am the destined ruler of Thallom." The fire faded abruptly from her eyes and her shoulders sagged despondently. "But now she knows I have acted openly against her, and even her sadistic nature will succumb to the anger she feels. I have been condemned to die."

Blaine clenched his fists in angry frustration. "But you are not yet dead, Noreen. Nor am I a will-less slave to Lura. We will fight together!"

Hope sprang into the girl's eyes and she stepped close to Blaine. He felt the nearness of her, the soft fragrance of her body next to his.

"If I could believe there was the slightest chance, Rex Blaine! I would gladly give my life to wrest Thallom from the evil that grips it and save your own planet from the invasion Tagath plans!"

Blaine gripped the girl's shoulders in his hands. "What invasion, Noreen?"

"Even now Tagath prepares the space armada for attack against your Earth. He and Lura feel it is dangerous to steal one by one the strong males they need. They reason that soon your people will discover the wall and build a defense against invasion, even as you discovered it. When that armada leaves I am to die..."

Her face was close to his, her breath warm and sweet upon his cheek. Blaine felt the blood pounding within him and his arms swept suddenly around her and his lips caught hers.

For a moment she stiffened in his arms. Then her warm body lay pressed against him and her lips responded to his. He could feel the rapid pulsing of her breast against him and he was swept away in an emotion he had never known before.

But as suddenly as their embrace began, she pushed him away from her. There was alarm in her eyes as she whispered: "Listen! Someone is coming!"

BLAINE TURNED his head toward the door and heard the sound of booted feet on metal. He stiffened.

Noreen left his arms and her fingers moved swiftly to the blouse she wore. She removed something from within it and whispered urgently.

"Here, Rex Blaine, take this! I know not what Lura plans for you but this will help you to resist her. Take it quickly—swallow it—it is the only thing I can do to help you..."

Blaine stared at the small white capsule she thrust at him. Then he heard the booted feet stop outside the cell door and the jangle of a key in the lock. Without a word he took the capsule and put it in his mouth. It dissolved almost instantly and he tasted a bitter-sweet substance. He swallowed, and almost at once the taste vanished from his mouth. He stepped away from the girl and whispered as the door of the cell opened: "I will remember all you have said, Noreen. And I will fight for your people and mine—and you..."

He saw the gratitude in her eyes, and also the hopeless sadness there. Then he turned to the door.

Two guards stood in the opening, parala-rays in their hands.

"You, Earthman, come with us."

"Where?" Blaine snapped.

The guard menaced him with the weapon. "Yours is not to question the orders of Queen Lura. Come!"

Blaine hesitated for a moment, but saw it would be useless to try anything with those paralysis guns trained on him. He had no desire to feel their stinging numbness again. Without looking back at the girl he strode from the cell.

The guards stepped back as he came through the door. One of them slammed it shut, turned the key in the lock, withdrew it and placed it in a recessed opening in the wall away

from the door. Then he motioned to Blaine with the paralay-ray. "Walk before us. And do not try anything."

Blaine nodded and walked slowly along the metal passage. It sloped upward and they came to a turn. He rounded it and felt the guards close at his back. The passageway stretched far ahead here and he continued to move along it. Finally one of the guards ordered: "Stop here."

Blaine stopped walking. The guard stepped around him and depressed a glowing knob in one wall of the passage. Soundlessly a partition slid back, revealing a small chamber. "Inside," the guard ordered.

He stepped inside and they followed him. The panel slid back in place and one of them stepped to a wall control. Blaine noted that a series of numerals were set in a dial indicating various levels: The indicator pointed to the seventh as the elevator was set in operation. He watched the needle rise rapidly to the top level, thirty. The mechanism of the elevator was soundless and he only had an indication of their speed by the draining of blood toward his feet. He guessed that a level was greater than an Earth floor would have been, and knew they must have come from deep beneath the palace proper.

The elevator stopped and one of the guards pressed a release catch. Soundlessly a panel slid aside. The guards motioned him from the elevator.

Blaine stepped into a room that was at once familiar to him. Instantly he recognized it as the room he had seen first in the globe Masters had held back on Luna. The thought made his mind whirl. That had been such a short time ago, and yet now it seemed that years had sped by in the interim. Luna seemed almost a nebulous dream, and Earth along with it.

And then he saw her.

She reclined on a long low couch

across the room, her eyes closed, seemingly asleep.

BLAINE'S BLOOD raced in spite of his hatred for her. She was clad in a diaphanous gown, and the swell of her breasts was tantalizing against the sheer material that held them in restraint. Her hair was long and free now, resting luxuriously against her bared shoulders. She was beautiful and desirable. Instinctively he knew she had planned it this way.

Almost in answer to his thoughts her eyes opened. She saw him standing across the room and her green eyes flashed in mock amusement.

"So the Earthman stares at the Queen of Thallom while she slumbers."

Blaine's eyes were cold. "You know as well as I do that you were not asleep. You ordered me brought here and assumed that pose on the couch. Very touching, Lura, but I'm not impressed."

For an instant anger flashed from her eyes. Then the slow smile returned to her lips. "The Earthman still shows bravery. Or is it really only a stubborn foolishness? Perhaps you too try to impress, Rex Blaine."

"I don't use guns or guards or threats," Blaine retorted.

She arched her eyebrows and slid one long gleaming leg from the couch to the floor. "So? And would you give me your word that you would not try to escape if I told my guards to leave?"

"I would not."

She rose slowly from the couch, her gown concealing now the slim length of soft thigh. "Perhaps you are afraid to be alone with me, Rex Blaine?"

His eyes remained set on hers unflinching. "I would not be afraid, Queen Lura. But perhaps you would be. I am not one of your puppets, to be made to dance at your every wish. Your throat is slender and lovely, but would you trust it in my hands?"

Her face reddened under the mockery of his words. For an instant anger shone in her eyes. "Your stubbornness begins to irk me, Earthman. Know you that were it not for me you would be dead even now. Tagath lusts for your blood."

"And you, Queen Lura?"

"I—" the rise and fall of her breasts quickened in tempo—"offer you life and happiness."

Blaine smiled thinly. "As a male concubine, my queen?" His words lashed her. "Would you have me begot you an heir to your tyranny? Has even Tagath lost his manhood as these puppet guards of yours?"

Her features turned livid with wrath. "You have been listening to that slave girl! Her lies—"

"You mean to Queen Noreen, rightful ruler of Thallom?" Blaine snapped.

"I said slave!" Her voice rose heatedly, then dropped to a cunning tone. "Or perhaps you would prefer the arms of a slave to a queen, Earthman?"

"I could know true love with her. The touch of *your* body would fill me with loathing."

Lura's lips trembled with rage. Her hand flew to a small weapon fastened at her slender waist. "Beware, Earthman, I have killed men for saying not a tenth as much. Do not take advantage of my charity in keeping you alive."

"Charity?" Blaine used the word as a curse. "Such as you showed John Masters? Or my crew who even now slave in your puppet labs? As you have shown your own people by usurping their leadership and defiling the Law of the Ancients?"

Her hand closed over the weapon again and her features paled. "You first intrigued me when I saw you through the tele-globe, Earthman. I value strength highly. And when you attacked Tagath and my guards, I felt that you could be very useful to

me and Thallom. You are a brave man. But you are also very rash. Listen to me closely, for this is the only time I will tell you.

"I offer you an honored place in my command. With me you can see a universe open to our plunder. I can offer you much more...." Her tone grew soft and inviting, her eyes slightly veiled. She moved slowly from the couch toward him and her leg slipped through the slit gown, showing pale and white to the breach of her thigh.

BLAINE STILLED the harsh words that rose to his lips. He hesitated.

"And what of Noreen? And my men Kline and Carter? And the other Earthmen you hold imprisoned here?"

She shook her head slowly. "That will be the test of your fealty, Rex Blaine. The slave girl dies and your Earthmen remain in the labs of Thallom to serve the purposes their knowledge and man-strength will provide."

Blaine's lips tightened and his eyes flashed at her. "Then take that weapon from your waist, Queen Lura. The only fealty you will get from me is death!"

She threw back her head suddenly and laughed. The sound of it chilled Blaine. Then she looked at him and there was no longer the invitation in her eyes or voice. "That would be too easy, Earthman. I shall not kill you. No, I will see you grovel at my feet. You will pay for the things you have said—after you answer to my every whim and desire!"

Blaine became aware in that moment that he had pushed her too far. He watched her hand leave the weapon at her waist and she motioned to the guards behind him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw their faces remain stoic, but the weapons they held were trained steadily upon him.

Lura walked over to a cabinet-like desk and opened a drawer. He saw her take a metal case from it. She opened

it on the desk top and her voice held a grim laughter.

"You evaded taking the drug of obedience from the hands of Noreen, Earthman. Now you shall feel its numbing power! Then we shall see what you will refuse to do in my service!"

She opened a small bottle of colorless fluid and inserted the needle of a hypodermic into it. He watched as she pulled the plunger back and the fluid filled the syringe. His blood chilled for he knew what this meant.

She stepped away from the cabinet desk and stared at him. "Relish your last few moments of free will, Earthman. So that you will know the complete power of the drug I shall show you what is in store for you should I so desire it."

Holding the hypodermic syringe she walked over to the great telescreen on the far side of the room. She flicked a switch on the machine and the screen flared into life.

Blaine stared at it, fascinated. He saw the screen clear into its three-dimensional focus and he was staring into a huge laboratory. It seemed to spread for miles. There were row upon row of work benches, assembly lines, and tiers of complicated machinery and chemical apparatus. At the head of each line a uniformed guard walked slowly down the line, a long whip in his hand. Huddled over the benches and assembly lines were hundreds of men. Their faces were expressionless, stony, their eyes seemingly vacant of life. Only their hands moved, performing the myriad tasks to which they had been assigned. Whenever the guards thought they were not moving fast enough the long whip would snake out and snap into the back of the worker. He saw the bodies of the men, stiffen under the cruel lash, even while their features remained impassive. But under the bite of the lash

their fingers worked more swiftly.

Lura narrowed the field of the scene and Blaine's breath caught in his throat. "Ned! George!" The names sped from his lips. He saw the radio man and the master technician side by side before a complicated mechanism of spiraling helixes and tubes.

"Yes, Rex Blaine, see how your comrades struggle with the intricacies of a sub-atomic converter. See their faces! See in them the same expression that will soon be yours!"

AS BLAINE watched he saw one of the guards step up to the two men and lash out with his whip. He saw Ned Kline stiffen under the cruel blow but his features remained impassive. His eyes vacantly staring, seeing nothing but the machinery under his swiftly moving hands.

Then Lura had turned a switch on the screen and another scene took its place there.

"You saw what is happening on the tenth level, Earthman. Now see how others of your Earthmen serve me and Thallom!"

Blaine saw—and what he saw made his face blanch. A huge medical laboratory spread on the screen. He saw row upon row of white metal tables with Earthmen lying prone upon them. White-coated guards and Thallom attendants supervised the extraction of life-force from the immobile victims. And as the scene switched again he saw the great spawning chambers where the life-force of Earth was combined with that of Thallom. Farther along the great stretch of laboratories, he saw the incubators and finally the result—vacant, staring children. Puppets. Living robot flesh to feed the armadas of Lura and Tagath under forced development. The children placed in energy machines. Great whirling flashes of light playing across their tiny frames. And they grew. Fast-

er than a weed under the nourishing of a sun-lamp. They advanced, grew to adulthood.

At the far far end he saw them leave the laboratories, uniformed in the service of Thallom.

As sick as all this made Blaine, he knew it was not really Thallom. It was the evil power of Lura and Tagath that wrought such sacrilege against the sanctity of life and liberty.

Lura turned off the machine. The screen went black.

"You will remember what you have seen, Earthman. Let it haunt you from this moment on."

She came toward him, the hypodermic in her hand.

Blaine tensed himself. He knew it would be better to die than become a soulless slave to this woman.

But even as he prepared to move, she seemed to sense his purpose. She motioned to one of the guards, who came swiftly around Blaine and stood before her. She took the paralay-ray from him and levelled it at Blaine.

"This will only be a light shock, Earthman. It will last but a few moments. Enough to give you the injection.

Before Blaine could act she had forced the weapon. A bright flash of radiance enveloped him and he felt his muscles freeze.

Only his eyes seemed capable of response. He saw her motion the guards to leave and they turned from his line of vision. Then she placed the weapon down on the cabinet and approached him. Her face was smiling, confident.

Blaine felt her loosen the sleeve of his shirt. Then suddenly he felt the pressure of the needle jabbing into him. No pain, his muscles seemed incapable of it. He watched her drive the plunger home and the fluid entered his body. Slowly she withdrew the syringe and stepped back.

"The paralay-ray will subside in a moment, Earthman."

She was right. Blaine felt life flood back into his body. He ground out a harsh curse and stepped toward her, his fingers reaching for her throat.

But he never completed the action. His hands stayed in mid-air where he had directed them, but somehow his mind failed to send the thought-pattern to his nerves. He stood like a statue, mentally forcing his body to respond. It was useless. Even his brain seemed to grow numb. He was unable to think clearly. His subconscious mind dictated his mind to act, but it was as if his consciousness were being held by steel bonds.

Lura's laughter, mocking and evil, rang out.

"Why don't you complete your plan, Rex Blaine? You think you are incapable of movement? Watch." She moved back toward the low couch and stood there. "Come here, Earthman. Stand before me."

The order registered somehow on Blaine's conscious thought-pattern. He fought against it but knew that he would obey her. He saw himself walk over to stand in front of her. It was weird, as if he were a spectator outside his own body, yet knowing that he was part of it. That he wanted to do whatever she commanded.

"Now, Earthman, you wished to place your hands around my throat. You may do so."

Blaine lifted his hands and placed them around her slender pulsing throat. The contact of her flesh with his was electric. Deep within his subconscious he wished to tighten those fingers, to crush the life from her body. But his conscious mind, attuned to her eyes, her beauty, her sensual being, refused.

Her voice grew passionate, inviting. "You have me in your arms, Earthman. What would you have me do—

offer myself to you?"

And Blaine replied, "If it is my Queen Lura's wish it is my desire."

"...It is my wish, Rex Blaine."

She sank slowly upon the couch, her gown falling away from her smooth thigh. Blaine sank beside her, his pulse pounding, unable to resist the nearness of her. His arms folded her against him and her lips sought his hungrily, open, her breath searching him in a passionate kiss.

Blaine's subconscious rebelled. He screamed against his conscious mind, sought to break down the barrier that held him from control of his will.

Suddenly he felt the barrier crumbling, the sudden surge of his own ego through the drugged command she held on him.

His hands were caressing her and she trembled against him, her breath hot on his face, her eyes veiled and dreamy. "...See, Earthman, what I can offer you...what I need from your strength..."

"So this is why you wanted the Earthman kept alive!"

BLAINE felt a rough hand grasp his shoulder and he was torn from the embrace of Lura. He was pulled up and away from the couch and thrown backward. His body hit the floor and he rolled painfully, unable to control his muscles properly to recover.

When he finally regained his feet he swayed there drunkenly, his body seemingly without purpose or will to act.

He saw Tagath standing beside the couch where the queen Lura was on her feet now, her features a mask of seething rage.

Her voice was shrill. "How dare you invade my quarters like this!"

Tagath took a step backward and pointed at Blaine. "I suspected that your interest in this Earthman was

more than a casual one! I told you before that he should die—now I will see to it myself!"

Lura's face was livid. "You will see to it! Take care, Tagath, you go too far! Your jealousy is flattering, but I will choose whom I love!"

Tagath did not flinch before her. Instead he drew a weapon from his belt and held it menacingly. "Perhaps I am jealous of the Earthman—but I also know that he is a dangerous man. I will not stand by and watch you risk our success in this system because of an impetuous romance!"

Lura laughed then. "Dangerous? You are a fool, Tagath! The Earthman is even now under the obedience drug. He has no will of his own! I tell you once and for all, leave my chambers and perhaps I will forget your treason..."

Tagath's eyes were cold upon hers. "You are not in a position to order me as a slave, Lura. Without me you are not queen of Thallom, and you know it. I have made up my mind. The Earthman dies, now!"

He turned swiftly toward Blaine, the weapon raised.

Blaine saw the weapon point at him. And he knew that in a moment a lethal ray would sear the life from his body. He willed himself to move, and almost his consciousness responded. But not quickly enough.

Tagath fired at that moment.

The ray lashed out, missing Blaine by inches. It was Lura who had deflected Tagath's aim. The queen lashed at him in fury, throwing him off balance.

At the same instant Blaine felt the numbing power of the drug leave him. It happened in a split second of time and he was aware of a return of power to his body. He leaped forward, his body streaking through the air in a flying tackle at Tagath's knees.

Even as he leapt he knew what had happened. The capsule Noreen had given him. She had said it would help him resist Lura. It had been an antidote for the obedience drug!

He hit Tagath then, and they toppled to the floor. The force of the collision had thrown Lura aside and she crashed against the couch.

Blaine regained his feet as Tagath rolled away, kicking desperately. Blaine saw that he still held the gun, and he knew that the next blast would not miss him. He came down on top of Tagath and smashed his fist into the man's mouth. He felt teeth crumble under the blow and then Tagath had brought his weapon to bear again.

Blaine lashed out savagely and deflected Tagath's arm as the weapon discharged. The blast exploded into the cabinet near them and the piece of furniture split in two smoking fragments and crashed to the floor.

Something landed beside Blaine. He saw that it was the parala-ray Lura had used on him. Desperately his fingers reached out and closed around the weapon. Beneath him, Tagath twisted sideways and savagely. Blaine felt the man's boot thud into his stomach, driving the wind from him. Then Tagath brought his weapon up again.

But Blaine acted first. The parala-ray spat a numbing ray into Tagath, and the man stiffened and moved no more.

Blaine heard a shrill cry of hate from Lura at that moment. The queen had regained her feet and was swaying in front of the couch. Her face was a mask of rage and she held a weapon in her hand now.

"You tricked me, Earthman! The drug had no effect on you! Tagath is right—you are too dangerous a man to live!"

But his parala-gun fired ahead of her. He saw the ray slash into her,

watched the shocked surprise on her lips, saw her stiffen, totter for a moment on her feet, and then fall unconscious to the floor.

BLAINE got to his feet, breathing hard. He looked down at the two rulers of Thallom. Deliberately he aimed the parala-ray at them again and fired another numbing charge into their unconscious forms. His lips were grim. He knew he should have killed them both where they lay. Yet he hesitated. There was Noreen to think of first, and the enslaved Earthmen in the labs. He listened for a moment, but heard no sound from the guards outside. He made his decision. Lura and Tagath would remain unconscious, as he himself had. Long enough at least to free Noreen, and then...

Blaine put the parala-ray in his belt and lifted Tagath's death-ray weapon from the floor. He turned then and hurried across the room to where the hidden elevator was.

The wall seemed a single section, but he saw the knob projecting from it at the spot he had entered the room. He pushed on it. Soundlessly a panel slid back and the elevator was open.

He entered quickly and set the indicator for the seventh level. The panel slid shut and he felt himself dropping, swiftly, silently.

When the indicator rested at the seventh level, the panel slid aside and he hurried out into the metal corridor. He ran swiftly, following the now down-sloping passage, around a turn, and in sight of the cell where he had left Noreen.

Alarm raced through him as he came to a sudden stop.

The door of Noreen's cell was open and she was being led from it by three guards. Tagath's men! The Earth traitor was wasting no time in seeing that the girl was executed!

Almost as the thought flashed through Blaine's mind, the guards saw him. They let out a shout of alarm and reached for their weapons.

Blaine sprang forward, his own gun raised. He shouted at the open-mouthed girl. "Into the cell! Quickly, Noreen!"

He saw the girl break away from the guard who held her, and Blaine fired. His first blast caught the foremost guard a glancing blow and the man spun on his feet, a cry of pain escaping his lips as smoke tinged the air from his charred clothing. Then he fell to the floor of the corridor.

Blaine was close upon the remaining two guards then. But they had their weapons out and one of them fired. Blaine threw himself to the floor and the sizzling heat ray cut the air over his head. He fired as he fell.

His ray slashed home and the man became a smoking hulk swaying on his feet. The last of the guards aimed deliberately then, and Blaine knew all was lost. He steeled his body for the blast of the heat ray.

Something smashed into the guard as he fired. Blaine shouted in fear as he saw that it was Noreen. The girl had leapt from the entrance to the cell in time to deflect the weapon and save Blaine's life.

Blaine was on his feet in that brief second and the weapon in his hand lashed out a sizzling ray.

It caught the guard full in the face and choked off the cry of fear from his lips. He fell to the floor of the corridor, a smoking, charred corpse.

Blaine held Noreen close against him for a long moment, then pushed her gently away from him.

"Oh, Rex, you're free! But how—"

Blaine quieted her. "There's no time for explanations, Noreen. I left Tagath and Lura unconscious from

a dose of parala-rays in Lura's chambers."

"We must get there quickly then!" the girl said, sudden hope filling her eyes. "The effects of the ray will not last long..."

Blaine shook his head. "Not before we have freed my men. We need help, Noreen."

The girl stared at him puzzledly. "But they are under the obedience drug! They are of no use to us!"

Blaine nodded. "I know that. But you have an antidote for that drug!"

"That is true! I had forgotten! In all of the robot-labs there are supplies of the antidote—but the guards—"

Blaine took her arm. "We'll have to take that chance. My men are on the tenth level. Do you know the way?"

She nodded, and there was a fighting light in her eyes that made his blood race. "I know the way, Rex! Give me a gun to fight with—I will show the men of Lura how the daughter of a Targal punishes them for their treason!"

BLAINE reached down beside one of the dead guards and retrieved a weapon. He handed it to her. It seemed large in her tiny white hand, but there was grim purpose in the way she held it.

"Let us go quickly then!" she breathed. "We may yet have time to get back to Lura and Tagath!"

She led the way down the long corridor, in the opposite direction from which they had come. A moment later she paused uncertainly, then she indicated toward the opposite wall. "Here! An elevator will take us to the tenth level."

He watched as she manipulated a knob in the wall.

As the panel slid back Blaine stiffened in alarm. There were shouts in the corridor behind them and he could

see a group of Tagath's men rounding the far turn. Even as the guards saw them they began to fire.

Blaine pushed the girl into the elevator and felt the sizzling blast of a heat ray strike the metal panel. The metal grew red and fused. Then the girl had set the elevator in motion.

They shot upward, the indicator rising from seven to ten, then stopped, and the panel slid open.

They were standing at the entrance of a vast chamber. Blaine immediately recognized it as the great room he had seen on the screen in Lura's chambers. Row upon row of vast machines and assembly lines stretched ahead of them and the air was filled with the loud hum of machinery.

Blaine's eyes swept the great chamber, over the swiftly working Earthman slaves. Their eyes were intent only upon the task they worked upon, and the guards walked up and down each line, lashing out to speed up those who seemed too slow.

Noreen pointed to an enclosed cubicle a short distance away. "That is the control center. There will be supplies of the antidote in there!"

Blaine nodded and ran toward it, the girl following him. He heard a shout of alarm go up as they neared the control room, and saw some of the guards leave the robot lines, dropping their whips and reaching for guns at their belts.

Then they had reached the cubicle. The girl dashed inside and Blaine stood in the entrance, his heat gun raised.

Two guards came around a massive metal pillar, weapons drawn. Blaine took careful aim and fired. The guards ran straight into the sizzling beam of Blaine's weapon. They died on their feet, their charred bodies skidding to the metal floor.

Then Noreen was back again. She held a small plastic case, the lid open.

He saw it was filled with small white capsules.

"The antidote!" the girl said breathlessly. "But we must hurry—the alarm has sounded now!"

As she spoke Blaine heard the insistent clangor of a bell rise over the hum of machinery. He reached over and grabbed a handful of the capsules, then motioned for the girl to stand behind him.

Swiftly then he dashed across the open space toward the first line of robot-men. As he approached, two more guards swung around the far end of the line and fired.

Blaine dropped to one knee and pressed the trigger of his own weapon. The long thin line of burning ray slashed out, caught one of the guards, burned him before he could fire again. The other guard let out a cry of fear and dashed back around the corner of the line out of range of Blaine's fire.

Behind him, Blaine saw that the girl was already going from one to another of the robot-men, forcing capsules into their unresisting mouths.

Then Blaine saw his two crew members. They were in the next aisle, busily working at the helix tubes he had seen on Lura's screen. The noise and furor of the fighting seemed not to affect them or any of the other drugged Earthmen.

"I'm going after my men!" Blaine shouted to the girl.

She nodded, her eyes flashing with excitement. "Don't worry about me, I can take care of myself, Rex Blaine!"

As she spoke Blaine saw her suddenly lift the gun she held and fire down the aisle. He wheeled and saw that two more guards had rounded the corner. The girl's ray caught one of them, and Blaine, cursing, ducked behind a corner of a machine and fired after her. His blast caught the second guard and the men fell.

"Then he smiled grimly to the girl. "Thanks," he said. She motioned him away, and continued along the aisle.

BLAINE cut diagonally through the maze of machinery and on into the next aisle. He saw that he was close beside Kline and Carter. "George! Ned!" he called out sharply. But neither of the men turned their heads. They continued to work mechanically, with expressionless faces.

Blaine ran up to them, conscious at the same moment that the clangor of the alarm bells was now being supplemented by rising shouts. That could mean but one thing. A full contingent of Tagath's men would have been summoned. In a moment he would be overwhelmed. Even as he thought of it, he heard the sizzling blast of Noreen's gun in the next aisle.

Blaine leapt forward beside Carter and Kline. He shoved two capsules each into their mouths, saw them mechanically swallow. Then suddenly a burning blast bit into the machine at his side.

Blaine dropped, hitting the floor of the aisle, his body half protected by the flank of the machine. He saw a group of Tagath's men running toward him, their weapons blazing.

He returned their fire, saw two of them go down in the withering heat of the ray. But more took their place. He knew he could not hold them off long now. He was outnumbered. And his mind shrieked the thought: *why didn't the antidote take effect!*

The guards had taken cover on either side of the aisle and were approaching in ones and twos toward him, firing as they came to keep him pinned down.

He heard another series of shouts go up nearby. But this time a new tone was in the voices. And his heart sang as he knew they were the voices of Earthmen! The men in Noreen's

aisle were being freed of the obedience drug!

Suddenly he saw Kline and Carter turn from the machine, their faces filled with awareness.

"Rex! Keep firing! We'll take care of these bastards!"

It was Ned Kline shouting. And even as Kline swore, he and Carter jumped two of the surprised guards as they came running up. Blaine fired into the other men bringing up the rear, and cut a blazing swath in their ranks. Then he heard a thud and saw that Carter had knocked one of the guards down and seized his weapon.

The technician's gun slashed a blazing lane into the now chaotic ranks of the guards. The line broke as they tried desperately to make a retreat.

But suddenly there was firing at their rear and Blaine let out a shout as he saw that Earthmen were attacking from the far end of the aisle. Tagath's men were trapped.

With grim lips Blaine fired into the milling ranks of the guards. Carter and Kline moved beside him, adding their guns to the holocaust. Within moments the last guard had fallen.

Quickly Blaine turned to his men. "Here, Ned, George, take these and release as many Earthmen as you can!" He handed them some of the capsules he held in his free hand. They nodded grimly and dashed off along the aisle.

Blaine shouted to the freed Earthmen. "Hold the guards from these aisles! We're freeing the rest of the men!"

He heard their answering shouts and saw the lust for battle in their eyes. He knew what a grim experience these men had been through. Men who had been kidnapped from Earth, vanishing mysteriously from their homes and friends. This was their moment of retribution. And they

would make the men of Tagath and Lura pay for the horror of robot slavery.

Blaine cut back through the machinery to the next aisle. He saw that most of the robot-men had already been freed of their drugged existence and were milling around Noreen. She came toward him excitedly.

"I have given the capsules to others to administer, Rex!" she said. "But we have no time to lose—we must get to Lura and Tagath now!"

Blaine nodded as Carter and Kline joined them. He motioned to the men. "Ned, you and George come with Noreen and me. The rest of you clean up this level. When you've finished here—start on the others. We've got the advantage of surprise yet—they won't know where we'll strike next!"

The faces of the Earthmen showed grim purpose as they nodded to Blaine's words. He turned and ran down the long aisle beside Noreen and his two crewmen.

Ahead of them their course was blocked by fierce fighting as the released Earthman formed a blockade of the front of the great chamber against the assault of the guards answering the alarm.

Noreen grabbed Blaine's arm. "We cannot go that way! But I know of another shaft close by!"

She led them through a maze of machinery and finally to the opposite side of the chamber. Blaine waited anxiously while she operated the control that released the wall panel. Finally it slid aside and they entered the car.

Moments later they were shooting up toward the level thirty.

THERE was only one guard in Lura's room when they entered it a few moments later. The man wheeled at the sound of their ap-

proach and tried to go for his weapon.

Blaine shouted at him. "Stand still!"

The guard hesitated, then saw it was useless to resist. Calmly he lowered his hand from the gun at his waist.

Blaine's eyes swept the room. And a chill alarm gripped him as he saw that neither Lura nor Tagath was there.

"They're gone!" Noreen said bitterly. "We were too late!"

Blaine stepped up to the guard. "Where are Lura and Tagath?" he asked.

The guard glared at him sullenly.

Blaine raised his weapon to a level with the man's chest. "I'll give you just ten seconds to answer."

The guard licked his lips nervously, stared at the gun and then at Blaine's relentless eyes. Finally he nodded.

"Tagath has gone to the fleet. The queen Lura has left for the Sacred Chamber of Law."

Blaine heard Noreen gasp at the man's words. "Rex! That can mean only one thing! Lura knows the revolt has turned against her forces in the palace. While Tagath prepares the fleet for invasion of your Earth she has taken sanctuary in the Sacred Chamber!"

Blaine's eyes snapped. "Then we will go there!"

The girl shook her head. "That is impossible. The Sacred Robot who guards Law and the great controls of the Wall will let no one enter but the ruler of Thallom. The chamber itself is invulnerable to any weapon. It is protected by an impregnable energy field."

Blaine frowned. "But if Lura went there—"

Noreen pointed to the great control screen across the room. "Lura used

the tele-globe. Only this one is attuned to the energy field of the Sacred Chamber."

Blaine gripped her arm. "Can it transport me into the chamber?"

The girl's eyes showed concern. "Yes—but the Sacred Robot will kill you—there is no weapon great enough to destroy him. He was built by the ancients to be invincible in guarding Law."

Blaine shook his head. "It's the only way. Show me how to operate it, Noreen."

A determined light filled her eyes. "Then I will go with you. I am the daughter of the Targal. If I must die, perhaps I can take Lura with me."

Blaine bit his lips but knew he could not force her to stay. He nodded. "Very well." He turned to Kline and Carter. Their faces were grim as they waited for orders. "Bind the guard after we leave," he told them. "Then return to our men on the seventh level. Hold the palace against Tagath's men. If we can show the people of Thallom that Noreen is their rightful queen they will revolt against Lura's law. If not—" He left the sentence hanging.

Then he turned to Noreen. She set her lips and walked to Lura's tele-globe. Her fingers depressed the controls and there was a hum of power. A moment later the screen sprang into focus and Blaine's eyes widened as he gazed upon the vast Sacred Chamber. It was a great oval-shaped room, filled with an amber glowing radiance. At one end there was a great raised section upon which metal busts were set. He heard Noreen murmur: "The great Targals! My father's likeness belongs there!" Behind the long line of gleaming statues was a control panel set with multi-colored dials and switches.

But Blaine's eyes saw only the center of the vast chamber. For where

there should have been a floor there was instead what appeared to be the open pages of a gigantic book. He saw then that the book was actually the floor of the chamber, that there were but two pages to it. And the writing on those pages glowed with iridescent flame.

And standing in the center of the book stood a tremendous robot. Over its head was a great screen that caught the rays from the book and this was, he knew, the screen Noreen had told him of. The screen that projected the Law of Thallom's Ancients to every corner of the planet. The Law by which all the people of Thallom lived. The Law which now stated that Lura was Queen...

And he saw Lura. She stood by the control panel behind the great line of Targal statuary. Her fingers were even then operating the controls.

"Quickly!" Noreen grabbed his hand. "Stand beside me!"

BLAINE stood close beside her and Noreen flicked a green dial on the control panel in Lura's chamber. Blaine felt a sudden humming fill his body. There was a flash of brilliant light; for a moment he seemed to lose consciousness.

But he knew he hadn't. When the light subsided he was no longer in the chamber of Lura. He stood beside Noreen in the Sacred Chamber of Law.

And the great Robot swung around on its-metal legs and advanced across the pages of the book toward them.

He heard Lura laugh shrilly from a distance. He heard Noreen cry out to him to run. And finally Blaine found life for his stunned muscles. He leapt away from the sweeping claw of the robot and tried to swing around it to get to Lura. But he was not fast enough. The robot moved swifter than he could have thought

possible. Blaine felt the cold steel of the robot's right arm strike him and a claw closed around his throat. He struggled vainly against the metal creature, but knew that it was futile. Those metal claws held him inexorably. And then a deep stentorian voice issued from the robot's head. It was a metallic sound, resonant, not a living sound, not a dead one, but the most awesome voice Blaine had ever heard.

"Who dares to enter the Sacred Chamber of Law! The penalty of Law is death!"

Blaine felt himself lifted from his feet as the pressure around his throat increased. His blood began to pound in his head, and he knew that in moments the life would be crushed from him.

"Wait!" He heard the sharp cry from Noreen. "I have brought this Earthman here! The Sacred Chamber is my right! I have come to avenge the murder of a Targal!"

The great robot seemed to hesitate, and Blaine felt the pressure relax around his throat for a moment. Then again came the deep, resonant voice.

"By what right do you come here? Only the ruler of Thallom has access to Law."

"I am the ruler of Thallom!" Noreen cried out. "Lura had usurped the power of Thallom! I am the daughter of the Targal, Rhandar! My father was murdered by Lura and Tagath. It was they who shut off the power that runs your great robot body and entered the Sacred Chamber to change the Law. You stand on a false Law—not the Law of Thallom's Ancients!"

The great robot gave a rumble of wrath. "The daughter of a Targal? What proof do you have?"

Noreen's voice answered proudly, "I carry the Great Seal of the Targal upon my breast, placed there at my

birth to designate my sovereignty. It is the same Seal that is the true Law—not the fraud at your feet, oh Sacred Robot!"

As Blaine watched, Noreen proudly parted the blouse at her breast. There, emblazoned in the soft fullness of her bosom was an iridescent shield. The great electric slot that served as the robot's eye flashed fire. A beam of radiance shot out from its head and crackled against the seal on Noreen's breast. She stood straight and unflinching as the terrible bolt of energy struck the shield—and was deflected!

"You see, O Sacred Robot, that it is the true seal of the Ancients!—Now test your power against the Law you stand upon!"

Noreen's voice rang loud and clear and the great robot stepped backward, still holding Blaine in its metal grasp. He saw the great metal head bend toward the book beneath it. And at the bottom of the page where shone a duplicate of the shield Noreen wore, a crackling blot of energy shot from the robot's head.

The bolt struck the shield and there was a blaze of shattering light.

The shield dissolved!

WHILE Blaine watched, awe-struck, the robot rumbled angrily and swept its bolt of energy across the great floor. The imprint of the Law flared into light and disintegrated. In its place shone another page of text. But, unlike the first, the metallic substance of the book resisted the flood of energy.

Blaine felt himself twisted about in the robot's grasp as the great metal being swung around and directed its lethal bolt of force down upon the emblazoned shield of the Targals now revealed.

The energy hit the shield and was deflected in a cascade of scintillating sparks. The shield remained unmarked, Blaine saw, just as its min-

iature duplicate had upon the breast of Noreen.

A vast rumble of wrath sounded now in the metallic voice of the robot. "You have spoken the truth, daughter of the Targal. You are the ruler of Thallom, and by the Law of the Ancients I do your bidding.

Noreen turned to the robot and poifted to Blaine. "The Earthman has saved my life and is a friend of Thallom. Release him!"

Blaine felt the great metal claw respond to her command and he was placed gently upon the surface of the book. As he took his feet upon the blazing surface, Blaine heard the harsh laughter of Lura far across the chamber.

"Taste your victory while you can, slave girl! For I have prepared for such an event! Look!"

Blaine gazed alone with Noreen across the wide expanse separating them from the statuary of the Targals. Lura stood before the great controls and as she spoke the screen flickered into life beside her. Blaine drew his breath in sharply as he saw into outer space, and there, gathered, was a mighty armada of space ships. Already they were slashing through the void toward the great rings of Saturn.

"Tagath has left with the mightiest fleet of Thallom for the planet Earth! Soon he will pass through the Wall—and I will join him for the conquest of your planet, Earthman! But you will not live to know it—not any of you on Thallom! For I have set the great master switch that will drive the negative energy field to over-capacity! This planet will burst asunder and Tagath and I will rule this solar system with the might of our space fleet!"

Sudden fear showed in Noreen's eyes and her voice was uncertain as she retorted: "You will not control

the negative energy field, Lura! Already the people of Thallom see the true Law and have heard what was said here in the Sacred Chamber over the great telescreens. You no longer have power over Thallom—and the men who keep the great energy field in operation will not allow—"

"Fool!" Lura's harsh laughter interrupted her. "Did you think that Tagath and I would leave the control of the energy field anywhere but here? I said I have set the master switch. There is no man who can stop me! Already the forces build up—feel this great planet tremble!"

Blaine felt a cold dread in him as the very walls of the great chamber began to hum with hidden forces. He saw Lura adjust the controls of the tele-globe and the scene on the screen flickered into the interior of the lead space ship. He saw the features of Tagath there, and there was laughter on them.

"I leave you now, Earthman and slave girl! You die together!"

Lura reached for the knob that Blaine knew would teleport her instantaneously from the Sacred Chamber to the control room of Tagath's space ship. He knew it was too late to reach her, but he sprang for the control platform.

Even as he moved he heard the stentorian voice of the great robot. "You have violated the Law of the Ancients, woman of Thallom. The penalty is death!"

AS LURA turned the knob that would send her to Tagath and safety, a bolt of energy shot from the robot straight toward her. She screamed and raised her hand to her face as if that would have protected her. In the same instant the tele-globe flared into operation and started to enfold her with a flash of radiance.

Too late. The searing energy of the

robot enveloped Lura's body. She was lifted away from the control platform and held high in the air over the Book of Law. Her screams echoed throughout the vast chamber and Blaine's blood chilled as he stared at the mighty metal giant in awe.

Slowly, the texture of the energy bolt of the robot changed. Its hue became deeper, and a searing breath of its power singed Blaine's cheek. He saw the body of Lura twist in one agonizing paroxysm. Then it disintegrated into a myriad dust-like fragments that settled slowly to the floor of the book.

"Thus is the Law avenged," intoned the great robot and the beam of energy subsided.

Blaine turned a frantic eye then toward the telescreen where Lura had stood but a moment before. He heard Noreen cry out. "Tagath passes through the Wall even now! We can never stop him!"

Blaine leapt to the control platform. He turned to the robot, towering out in the middle of the vast chamber behind him. "The Law is not yet avenged!" he cried. "Tagath and his fleet must be destroyed! Can you close the Wall in Space, Robot?"

In answer a bright green beam flicked out from the robot and touched the great seal of the Targal in the floor of the chamber. "There are secrets of the Ancients that I alone am entrusted with," the robot replied in a toneless voice. "The Law shall be avenged."

As the robot spoke the shield shimmered and an opening formed in the book of Law. Blaine saw Noreen run hurriedly toward him as the aperture widened, and then he saw a shaft that seemed to drop endlessly into the bowels of the planet Thallom.

Down this shaft the robot sent a brilliant stabbing red beam. Blaine ran to meet Noreen and folded his

arms about her protectingly. Together they saw a wall of black energy rise from the shaft to meet the robot's ray.

There was a rumbling sound that shook the room and Blaine knew that Lura had told the truth when she said she had stepped up the negative energy field to over-capacity.

But the robot sent another beam of force into the black wall that swept up the shaft. There was an explosion that rocked the chamber, and the wall of negative energy collapsed.

In the same instant Blaine's eyes flicked to the telescreen beside them. He saw Noreen glance there too and heard her gasp.

Tagath's ship and the huge fleet behind him had entered the channel in the great Wall of Space between Thallom and Saturn. In moments the fleet would be through it and flashing through the void toward Earth.

But suddenly the void seemed to shimmer in the screen. The asteroid belts of Saturn glowed into incandescence and the ships of Tagath's fleet seemed to erupt into thousands of fragments.

"Look!" Noreen breathed in awe. "The great Wall has discharged its energy field! The fleet is destroyed!"

Blaine saw that she was right. The fragments of Tagath's fleet fluttered in space and were drawn into the asteroid belts of Saturn.

Slowly the telescreen darkened and flickered out. The rumbling deep within Thallom quieted. Blaine turned his gaze to the great robot. The metal giant played a soft ray against the shield of the Targals and the opening in the Book of Law closed. Again the rumbling voice filled the room.

"Thus is the Law of the Ancients avenged. Know you, Queen Noreen, that the energy field is destroyed. The Ancients built it to serve Thallom.

(Continued (Continued on page 45))



CONQUEST

By Rog Phillips

**What actual result is there in the
act of conquest? What is its cube root?**

JAN ran tirelessly, his long clean limbs carrying him at express train speed across the uneven terrain. The small deer was beginning to show evidences of tiring. Its foam-flecked mouth was open, the swollen tongue protruding over the teeth. The ten or more miles of the chase had proven Jan's superior strength.



The deer rounded a dense patch of blackberry bushes and bounded out of sight over the crest of the hill. To Jan's keen eye it seemed that the deer stumbled at the instant of vanishing from view. Eagerly he put on a burst of speed to catch up and make the kill.

The scene that burst into view brought amazement into his clear blue eyes. The deer had stumbled, but caught itself, and was bounding down the gentle slope. Jan thrust curiosity away and concentrated on regaining the ground lost. His naked feet touched the turf with pile driver force every ten feet. The muscles under the tanned skin of his legs worked with smooth effort.

The deer was headed directly toward a glistening square spot just ahead. It was in mid stride when it reached it, its front legs doubled, ready to straighten and touch the ground at the right instant, its hind legs stretched out behind.

In that position it sailed over the glistening square that was set flush into the ground, and—vanished.

It vanished about like it might vanish around a tree. Its head and antlers went first, followed by the rest of it. One hoof seemed to hesitate, hanging in the air by itself. Then it was gone.

Jan turned desperately to avoid the spot and brought himself to a halt a few feet beyond. The hair on the back of his neck felt prickly with fear of the unknown. He returned cautiously to inspect the mysterious, glistening square slab.

It was no more than four feet across each way. There was no way of telling what its surface was like. About where its surface might be was a soft carpet of glistening, cool force that seemed neither solid nor

fluid. It was something like the surface of a glowing ember in a dying fire, smoothed out flat and spread with uniformity over an area of sixteen square feet.

Jan's eyes pulled away from this fascinating thing and turned to survey what had first caused him to break his pace in surprise. A short distance away a skeleton of twisted and sheered off steel girders hinted at what had once been a bridge across a deep gash in the rolling terrain. On the other side was what had once been a huge city of skyscrapers, though Jan had never heard of such a thing and did not know that that was what it had been.

With a frown of uneasiness he dismissed the ruins of the city and the bridge and turned to the mysteriously glowing square once more. The deer had vanished over it. Therefore it must have something to do with the vanishing of the deer. Since he had chased the deer so far, it would be foolish to turn away without investigating. The deer might still be there somewhere.

Jan's face lit up with an idea. He looked around until he spied a rock about as big as a fist. He came back with it and stood thoughtfully near the edge of the mysterious square. Then he tossed it with just enough force to carry it across. When it reached a point above the edge of the square it vanished. Jan waited, but it didn't land on the other side. It had simply ceased to exist!

Jan looked thoughtful for a moment. He turned and went back to the patch of blackberry bushes. Taking his long slim blade from its deer-skin scabbard he cut a long, tough stick, trimming the younger shoots away. With this he returned to the calmly glistening, mysterious slab.

Ready to drop his hold on the stick at the first sign of the unusual, he thrust it part way into the area where things vanished. The end of the stick disappeared. There was no sign of any force creeping along the stick to his hand. He waited, reassuring himself. Then he stuck the stick in a little farther and it vanished a little farther along toward his hand.

He held it that way, his nostrils flaring with tenseness. Then slowly he drew the stick back. The vanished part of it returned to sight. It came out and was not changed in the least.

He sniffed at it. It smelled no different than it should. He felt of it carefully. It felt normal.

Reassured, he thrust it into the area of vanishment again. He pulled it out again. It delighted him to watch it vanish and reappear. He laughed gleefully. The deer was forgotten in the excitement of this strange game in the shadow of the crumbling bridge.

Suddenly the vanished end of the stick jerked in his hand. In spontaneous alarm he pulled toward him. The stick came unwillingly. Something held it.

TERRIFIED, Jan dug his heels in the turf and pulled. Slowly inch by inch, the stick reappeared. But with it appeared a fat, pale hand, followed by a sleeved arm.

Jan slapped at the hand and pulled harder. The hand hung on grimly. Another hand appeared, gripping the slowly emerging arm. It fingered its way up the sleeve until it too gripped the stick.

Jan let go and sprang back several feet. He hesitated, ready to flee.

When he let go of the stick the

hands dropped to the ground. The fat fingers dug into the sod and hung on. A bloated face came into sight and drew back into nothing once more.

The face appeared again and stayed, flushed with exertion. Little by little the face was followed by a neck, shoulders, and a thick torso. The last to appear was two short legs.

The figure stood up shakily. It was covered by a brown uniform. Although Jan did not know it, this was the uniform of a field marshal.

The pig like eyes in the fat face blinked at him stupidly, then turned to survey the ruined city.

Jan recognized the newcomer for a man, though he had never seen one with such a shape. Vaguely he wondered how such a man could catch wild animals,—and if he couldn't, how he could eat enough to have grown up.

The man was even more of an enigma to Jan than the glistening square. And he might be dangerous.

Jan had wandered far in his brief lifetime. Nowhere had he found more than a handful of other wandering nomads, all like him in build; long of limb, lithe and powerful of shoulder, able to run swiftly all day without tiring.

This man, if man it was, came no higher than Jan's heart. He obviously wouldn't be able to run faster than the exceedingly rare, short-legged pig that became so fat when it grew up.

The man turned his fat face back toward Jan. The look in the small eyes made Jan's hand steal toward his sheathed knife. The eyes saw that movement. They narrowed cruelly. A sneer appeared on the bloated lips.

Suddenly a fat hand darted down to a lumpy object on the man's hip and drew out a squat blue object. It came up. Jan could see a dark hole in it. He stared curiously.

Unconsciously he had drawn his knife as the man drew the strange object. His keen nostrils brought him the smell of sweat that has the odor of a tense body. His hunting instinct told him this creature was going to charge.

JAN felt something hot touch his left shoulder. With it came the sound of a sharp report. The strange thing in the man's hand buckled queerly.

Jan looked at his shoulder. There was a gaping, angry wound in it. In some way this man had hurt him. He didn't stop to analyze how or why. The fact was there. He could either turn to run or advance to fight,—and he had never yet turned to run.

He had learned the trick of weaving in and slashing, and withdrawing quickly. This stood him in good stead. The queer thing in the man's hand barked at him, but missed hurting him each time.

Jan's knife reached in unerringly and slashed the wrist of the hand holding the spitting thing. The blood gushed out in a pulsating stream.

The man dropped the gun and tried to stem the flow. Jan took this opportunity to dart in again and slide his blade across the fat neck.

A look of horrible realization appeared in the man's eyes. He turned, stumbled forward, and fell headlong into the space above the mysteriously glistening square slab. The soles of his shoes seemed to hang in the

air briefly before they followed the rest of him into nothingness.

Jan touched his hand gingerly to the raw wound in his shoulder. It was a day's journey to the healing spring where he could bathe the wound and plaster it with healing mud.

His eyes surveyed the scene for a last time, taking in the strange slab flush with the ground, the skeleton of girders that jutted out from each side of the gorge, and the strange heaps of steel and masonry on the other side. Then he turned and started back the way he had come. By the time he vanished over the rise he had settled into the long, easy trot that would carry him a good fifteen miles an hour all the way to the healing spring.

Behind him the glistening square slab rested, oblivious of his departure. The two halves of the wrecked bridge still reached yearning, torn arms toward one another; and across the gap the ruins of the huge city squatted in silence, coldly aloof.

A wind born leaf dipped down in coy flight to investigate the slab—and slipped past the veil. The fresh cut end of the stick Jan had out formed a white dot on the green carpet of stunted grass. Bright red stained a large spot on the green and formed a ribbon that led to the edge of the square of cold luminescence;—the red trail of blood left by the strange visitor from out of the square. And in the clean blue sky a bright sun beamed benignly over all, ignoring—

"MY leader!" Carl Grinch clicked his heels softly and bowed stiffly from the waist. His high, intellectual forehead, clear blue eyes and finely cut features, together

with his civilian garb, indicated that he was a scientist. He was, in fact, much more than a scientist. He was THE scientist of Aleme.

"At ease." The leader waved a gloved hand carelessly, a cruel smile twisting the harsh face of the dictator of Aleme and avowed leader of downtrodden masses in every country on Amba.

His eyes held a gleam of satisfaction as he watched the uneasy tenseness of the scientist. He gloried in a sadistic satisfaction at his power to snuff out the life of one so great,—or let him live to serve his Leader.

"I told you not to come to me until you had succeeded in the task I set you," Generalissimo Hute Hitle said coldly. "Your presence means that you have, no doubt?"

"Yes, my Leader," Carl Grinch smiled. "Everything is in readiness."

"Good," Hitle said. He rubbed his chin slowly, a smile of triumph creasing his face into unaccustomed wrinkles. "Now we can't lose. We will let loose the destruction and let it take its course. After it is over we will return to rule an unresisting planet. Explain again to me the theory of the device."

"The theory of operation of the device is, of course, understandable only by a highly trained specialist," Carl Grinch said placatingly.

"You know what I mean," Hute Hitle snarled. "I'm not interested in what makes it work. Only in what it does."

"To begin with," Carl Grinch said. "Space has three dimensions. We live in those three dimensions of length, breadth, and thickness. This is called the space continuum.

"There is also a three dimension-

al time continuum. This also has length, which is past-present-future. In addition it has width and breadth, which are approximated by the idea of simultaneity to a certain extent. This is not, however, the simultaneity of events co-existent in our one, three-dimensional space. All events we can be aware of are in one point in the time continuum, which moves along a single time line.

"Since there are only three dimensions of space, all things must be in our space. It is the time co-ordinates that determine whether we are aware of something or not. At this very moment there is an infinity of universes all occupying the same space, but each in a different position in time. They are existing now, but separated from us in a direction at right angles to the universal time stream.

"Mathematically, these other universes are expressed in co-ordinates that have the square root of a minus one as a coefficient. Also mathematically, these universes are imaginary, but not in the non-mathematical, mythical sense. They are just as real as ours, but relatively imaginary or relatively non-existent.

"All this has been known by others. They have also known that to make an imaginary value real it is only necessary to multiply it by the square root of a minus one. Then it becomes real. This fact became the entering wedge into the principal that enabled me to succeed in bridging the abyss of right angle time travel.

"As you know, many years ago the secret of single dimension time travel was solved. However, it would not answer our problem. Though it is true time travel, it am-

mounts to nothing more than perfect stasis for controlled periods, and if destruction hits the space the time traveller is in, he is as vulnerable as he would be if not travelling. In order to escape that it is necessary to step over, so to speak, into one of the imaginary universes at right angles to us in the time continuum and travel forward there.

"So, all I had to do was discover some principal for multiplying a sector of space by the square root of a minus one. As you know, I did that. Then I discovered that there are gaps, so that it was impossible to discover another universe co-existent in space, without determining the basic equation of the time curve.

"As everyone knows, both time and space are curved, due to the distortion of mass on surrounding space and time. The exact equation for this curvature had to be determined.

"We knew beforehand that it had to be a cubic equation. Each cubic equation has three roots for every value of the independent variable, which is in space. It also has three roots for every value of the time. Basically, that means that if any primal unit exists in our space, it exists in three forms, the positive, the negative and the neutral. These units are the positron, the negatron, and the neutron. Those three are the three solutions in space to the co-ordinates of the existential primal point.

"But also there must be two other universes co-existent with ours in space, but separated sideways in time. They would be impossible to find with the machine without solving the cubic equation of the curvature of our time line."

"So you have solved that and con-

tacted one of the other two universes," Hute Hittle broke in impatiently.

"Exactly," Carl Grinch said.

"Take me to it," Hute ordered.

"I want to see for myself."

"Yes, my Leader," Carl said, clicking his heels again and bowing. The bow was lower than usual to hide the gleam of triumph that rose unbidden in the scientist's eyes.

THE Leader stood with military stiffness, looking curiously at the square of glowing force. It was set flush with the wooden floor of the room, and seemed to be nothing more than a square carpet of luminosity.

Near it was a tripod with a telescope attached. The telescope went up to the edge of the space above the square place and seemed to end there,—a tube with no lens in the end.

"The telescope is pointed into one of the other two worlds," Carl was explaining. "Without a physical solid connecting the two there is no contact."

"What is the nature of that?" Hute asked, pointing at the glowing square surface.

"It's difficult to explain it," Carl answered, "I'll put it this way. Two attracting bodies that are close enough together will revolve around each other, like the sun and our planet, Amba. The material of this slab is what I have named tri-matter. It consists of matter from all three universes of our time equation, blended into one solid. Before I was able to contact these other two universes it was necessary to use the machine, which took incredible power to operate for a few brief moments, and had to be so del-

icately controlled that the slightest vibration unbalanced its adjustment. Once the materials were gathered and blended so they could not separate, I had a permanent bridge into the other worlds. The machine and its incredible power were no longer needed.

"You must remember that the three universes occupy the same space, so that spatially they are not separated at all. Their separation was temporal, and at right angles to the path from the past into the future. The attracting forces of the atoms had to be directed across this plane of time by the machine. When that took place the materials had to be brought together so that the three substances blended would cohere. Once they were brought into that state the bridge was established. The bridge is anchored at this end in the matter of our universe and at the other two ends in the matter of those universes, just as the bridge above this building is anchored on this side to the matter of the bank of this side of the river, and on the other to the matter there."

"And you just have to walk across?" Hute asked.

"That's all there is to it," Carl replied casually.

"And," Hute's eyes took on a crafty gleam. "A time machine in one of these other universes could carry me to any point in the future without danger it might have encountered in this one, such as an atom bomb dropped on the space it would have been in here?"

"That's correct," Carl agreed. "If you will look through the telescope you will see my aides already nearing completion on the time machine."

Hute placed his eyes to the tele-

scope. The scene that appeared was quite a normal one. The landscaping was different in many ways. The vegetation was prolific and of strange forms. But for a considerable area the ground was flat, meeting the surface of the ordinary world only at the one spot where the tri-matter block was anchored.

A dozen workmen were busy on the conventional time machine. Hute could see that a few more days would see it completed. He took his eyes away, satisfied.

THE Leader stood before the intricate panel. It was located in a deep subterranean room, safe from all attack. He knew that there were other similar panels in countries all over the planet, different only in one respect.

The hundreds of buttons on his panel were set to send robot rockets roaring toward predetermined targets. In a second he could end the long war by a rapid series of pushes on buttons. The enemy could do the same, wiping out his own country, Aleme.

These panels had been constructed by international agreement, so that every country could know that it would be suicide to use atom bombs in war. Suicide for all. Afterwards there would be nothing but isolated bands of wandering savages, without the rudiments of civilization. A few generations after such a holocaust these wandering bands would lose all ability to learn. The art of reading would be forgotten. The past would be forgotten or distorted into legends of a God Race. If that happened, so much the better. When he reappeared again in the world he would be accepted as a God.

With his superior knowledge, and with modern weapons to back his authority, he could be in reality the world Leader he HAD to be to fulfill his insatiable ambitions.

The war was stalemated. Soon the tide would turn and the enemy would gain the advantage. His hold on Aleme would weaken. If he survived the defeat he knew must come, he would be tried as a war criminal according to the war code set up ten centuries before, and executed.

A few minutes of exertion pushing buttons, a hasty trip to the trimmer slab, and over into the time machine that was set to return him to normal time rate after three centuries, and he would be in a position to rule the world.

He contemplated the terrific cost. A billion and a half people would be killed in the space of a few hours. Two hundred million of them would be his own state-slaves, his subjects.

His heart would feel the burden of that awful responsibility. No ordinary man was capable of deciding the good of the world for all future time with strict impartiality and willingness to sacrifice one whole generation so that world peace might come. No ordinary man had a great enough soul to carry the burden of the great responsibility. The ordinary man quaked with pangs of conscience at the murder of a single person. He, Hute, had many times had to decide on mass executions for the good of the whole.

He had tried, as other great leaders before him, to bring about permanent world peace by the forging of one world government, supreme, and controlled by one man,—unified under one dominant will.

Too few people could see that

such was the only path to peace. On any other course there would always be would-be leaders who would try to set themselves up in authority.

On any other course world planning would be stalemated by the eternal bickering and disagreement among nations and self-appointed saviors of the common man.

Only in the Unified World State could competition be entirely eliminated, and world planning become a reality.

Hute, standing before the control board, squared his heavy shoulders manfully, jutted his strong jaw out at a dominant angle, and spoke to the silent walls as he had often spoken to the masses.

"If I fail to have the courage to do this thing, then the welfare of all future generations will be on my shoulders. The sacrifice of the billion or two now living is a SMALL price to pay, compared to the sacrifice of countless billions of future generation if I weaken."

"If I weaken—!"

THE thought of what would happen,—the war crimes trial, the ignominy of death as a war criminal at the hands of fools who couldn't understand the noble, selfless motives that governed his life and caused him to sacrifice the comforts of home and normalcy as a public servant and the purpose,—the goal toward which he strove, gave him the courage to press the first button. With that simple act the fate of Tranx-Yrhl was directly sealed, and with it the retaliation against his own country. That knowledge made easy the pressing of the other buttons.

When it was finished he walked stiffly from the room and took the

elevator to the surface. His general staff awaited him. They stood awkwardly, faces pale, in this historic moment.

He nodded imperceptibly to signify that the deed was done. A few dry throats swallowed loudly in the hush of imminent death.

Hute Hitle marched stiffly through the passive group. One after another fell in behind him. The procession marched down to waiting cars.

The cars crossed the bridge. There they stopped. As one man the Leader and his general staff looked back at the great city they loved so well. The Sacrifice they were making for the good of humanity pressed heavily on their hearts.

With bowed heads they turned back and went down the path to the research building.

Carl Grinch and his science aides were waiting. They paled at the knowledge that the deed was done and there was no turning back now.

Hute placed a fond hand on Carl's shoulder.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with me?" he asked, his voice choked with emotion.

"The success of the Plan depends on my staying," Carl replied, his voice shaken with the emotion of the moment. "The time machine is constructed in connection with the tri-matter block so that nothing in either of the other two universes can enter it. After you enter, it must be sealed from this side for the period of time travel, so that nothing can enter from this side until it is time for you to come back. I, and my aides, must remain to do that."

"Your sacrifice is greater than mine," Hute said simply.

"It is very little compared to

what *you* are sacrificing, Carl said, smiling, with a trace of amused contempt carefully hidden in the back of his eyes.

Hute took his hand from Carl's shoulder and gravely shook hands with Carl's aides. It was his simple gesture of reward for their great sacrifice. They would die with the gratifying knowledge that the Leader himself had taken their hand and shaken it in gratitude at a service well performed.

Then he squared his massive shoulders and stepped onto the trim-matter slab—and vanished. One by one the members of his general staff followed.

When the last of them stepped into thin air above the softly glowing square, Carl walked over to a switch board and pulled the disconnects that broke the surge of power playing over the room.

His pale assistants watched, hypnotized.

Carl smiled at them encouragingly. He glanced at his watch and estimated the time left.

"Another hour at the most now," he said quietly. "It could come any second."

The wooden walls of the room closed them in with brooding forboding. A heavily barred window brought a view of the steel bridge that led to the city.

A large clock on the wall became the center of attention. A red second hand moved with slowly deliberate swiftness around the dial.

And in the center of the waiting group the luminous square built flush with the wooden floor waited too, its face inscrutable, its substance anchored in three roots of Being.

An electrical tension was building

up around the hushed group of scientists. Vague stirrings of cold light rippled the surface of the square block of tri-matter.

"The cleavage is beginning," Carl said quietly. "When I say the word step through. The entropy shift must be just right or we'll find ourselves with Hitle and his gang. Now!"

As one man the group stepped on to the block and vanished. An instant later the halocaust broke loose.

CARL Grinch stood before the tribunal of the United Nations of the planet Amba. Video cameras pointed at him from every direction. The audience room was filled to overflowing with officials, and over the whole planet people had paused in their work to watch him and listen to his words.

"We, of Aleme," he was saying "Dared not openly defy Hute Hitle. He was too strongly entrenched. Unless we obeyed his orders to the letter we were executed; and a dead man cannot serve the interests of all Amba. My researches gave me the plan I had been looking for.

"As you all know, time travel was discovered many centuries ago. It amounted to nothing more than perfect stasis. A person could travel forward in time to any period, but not backward. The time machine in marching forward existed at every instant, and was therefore always present to the view of outsiders.

"My researches made possible sideways travel in time. By means of a device that used fabulous amounts of power, I was able to gather matter from two other universes existing in the same space as our own, but with different time

co-ordinates. I proved to Hitle that in one of these other universes he could escape the destruction he planned, and then return to a torn world and fulfill his destiny as ruler of the planet.

"I told him nothing but the truth. Because of that he believed me. If I had told him one lie he would have seen through the whole thing.

"In order for you to understand just what happened, and why Amba was not destroyed when he pressed the buttons that started the atom bombs on their journeys of destruction, I must tell you a little of the basic nature of reality. Our universe is at all times and in every respect a root of a cubic equation. It has long been known that space is curved. Being curved, it is not the expression of linear equations, but of equations of some higher order. It had never been determined if that order was quadratic, cubic or higher. I determined that it was cubic.

"To tell you how I solved the constants of the equation would be to go into material too complicated for any but the expert, so I'll skip that. When I solved that, though, I was able to calculate the field necessary to create a bridge from this root of the equation to the other two, gather substances from those two, blend the substances, and create a natural bridge. I did that. BUT instead of blending substance from our own universe with the other two, I kept the field going. The field acted as a bridge, and when the disconnects were broken that bridge vanished, leaving only a bridge between the other two universes.

"Now while the field lasted, all three roots were blended into the Whole, or cubic equation. In plain language, all three universes within

the limits of the field were identical. So it was a simple matter to get Hute and his general staff to carry out their plans in one of the other universes rather than this one, and then escape into a time machine in the third universe.

"After they did that I merely pulled the disconnects and destroyed the field that linked our universe temporarily with the one where the destruction went on according to plan. When Hitle and his men wake up a few centuries from now they will find that things went according to plan. They will find their destruction and their bands of savages to rule, if they can rule them. But their threat to us is gone. We are rid of them for good."

The chairman cleared his throat importantly as Carl paused.

"But what of the people in this other universe,—the ones who were destroyed by the bombs let loose there? And their descendants who will survive until the day Hitle returns to force his will on them?"

Carl smiled broadly.

"They were destroyed, sir," he answered. "According to plan. That is the truth. But is isn't ALL of the truth. You see, the cubic equation that connects this universe of ours with the other two has only ONE real root. The other two are imaginary. That is what I didn't tell Hitle. The number one is a cube root of itself, and represents our own un-

iverse. The field set up by the machine was literally another cube root of one acting on our universe as a factor, transposing its forms into an imaginary universe. There Hitle succeeded in his conquest of all Amba. It was not the conquest he figured on however, because events are merely single values that fit the cubic equation,—never the equation itself. What Hitle did not know that no one can ever succeed at conquest, but only at what might more accurately be termed the cube root of conquest.

"And in his case that cube root of conquest was imaginary, represented by the number, (a minus one half, plus the square root of a minus three fourths.) Cube that quantity yourself! You will get one for the answer. Square that quantity and you will get the third cube root of unity. Blend or multiply the two together and you get unity, which is reality in our plane of the omniverse. Multiply unity by one of the two imaginary cube roots of one, and you transform the one, or our reality, into an imaginary plane. Try it. Get a piece of paper and work it for yourself! And study the metaphysical applications of the relationships of the three cube roots of unity,—the relationship of mind, imagination, and reality, the relationships of the positive, the negative, and the neutral units of matter;—and wonder!"

THE END

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TOO MANY WORLDS

By

Irving E. Cox Jr.



Would you like to wake up in a nightmare world where none of the old laws work? Then take this trip into a strange hell

HE WAS HALFWAY to the city, barreling along the express arterial before he recovered from the numbing hypnotic of the nightmare. He remembered nothing of the dream, except the feeling that invisible cords were being drawn tight on his mind, slowly smothering him. He had awakened exhausted. Mechanically he went through the morning routine of dressing, kissing Irene, and leaving for work.

As his mind began to function again, he became aware that his speedometer had climbed past eighty.

He decreased the speed. Then, with a cold shock shivering along his spine, he looked again at the chromium dial and its surrounding field of red leather. He was driving a sleek, Nile-green Cadillac convertible. And he had never seen the car before.

He turned off the arterial and pulled to a stop on a deserted side street near the Bay. Wisps of cold morning mist hung in trailing threads over the road, dancing gray shadows against the dismal sky. With trembling fingers he twisted the registration slip, fastened to the steering col-

umn, so that he could read it. The owner of the Cadillac, he discovered, was Albert Hammond, of 3754 Via Wanda Way.

But that was his own name! And he drove a Buick, two years old.

Hammond snapped open the glove compartment. There was his old brier, Irene's scarf, the familiar Auto Club map book, and a letter which he recognized at once. Irene had given it to him three days ago and asked him to mail it on his way to work. As he sometimes did, he had stuffed it into the glove compartment and forgotten it.

But that had been in the Buick! He was sure of that. Or nearly so. He checked the registration slip again, and saw that he had bought the Cadillac six months before. Sweat broke out on his forehead. Somehow he had forgotten his own actions for the past half-year.

He felt ashamed—and frightened. He wondered if he should see Dr. Betts. But, if he did, what would he say? That he thought he was cracking up? That his mind was failing him at thirty-five, when he had reached the floodtide of mental and physical vigor? There was nothing in his life to drive him to madness. He was in good health, successful in business, immensely happy with Irene and their two children.

No, it was impossible to allow even a doctor to know what had happened. Hammond had to handle this himself.

He went on to work. The General offices for his freight line were on the top floor of a warehouse-terminal on Market Street not far from the Ferry Building. The first overnight rigs from Los Angeles and Portland were pulling into the yard, scarlet boxes lettered in flaming orange THE RED ARROW LINES. Hammond took the elevator up to his office.

THE BILLING-ACCOUNTING department, spread over forty desks in the main office, was in a chaos of activity. Hammond was used to a friendly, relaxed office atmosphere. He had always prided himself on his good relations with his employees. No more than a score had quit the Red Arrow Line in the past decade. Most of them called him by his first name.

Now, only one or two nodded, and their greeting was hesitant and fearful. The violent onslaught on work redoubled as he entered the office. It was a burlesque of efficiency, set to a driving tempo. It was not a business office, but its caricature, the sort of farce dreamed up for a musical comedy or a slap-stick parable out of Hollywood. The switchboard girl actually cringed when Hammond approached, as if she expected him to lash her with a whip. And Joe Kelly, the chief biller, leaped fully three feet when Hammond addressed him.

Hammond fled into his private office. He jerked a pint of whisky out of his desk drawer and poured himself a stiff drink. This office comedy must be something else he had created during the past six months. If so, the Red Arrow Line would have been driven close to insolvency. Hammond called his chief accountant on the intercom and asked to see the profit statements for the last two periods.

After he had read the report, he snatched up the whisky and drained what was left from the bottle, for the profits had been enormous. The accountant hovered over his shoulder anxiously, pulling at a loose button on his frayed coat. For all the world, he reminded Hammond of Mr. Cratchit in the *Christmas Carol*.

"Sit down, Tim; sit down!" Hammond had intended to speak softly, as he always did, but he was amazed at the vicious bite in his voice. He

had a feeling that he was someone else, not himself—an actor playing a role in a ridiculous farce.

"Mr. Hammond, sir—I—you see, sir—this report—"

"Out with it, Tim!" The bark was angrily ferocious.

"The truth is, sir, I know we're not showing quite the profit that we should this period. It's the new ship line you bought last week."

Mentally Hammond reeled. What ship line? So far as he knew, he was only in the trucking business, and, as such things went, a very small operator.

"Trans-Pacific is basically sound, of course," the accountant assured him. "We've taken over twelve more good freighters, and thirty new tankers; but their receivables have to be overhauled. I'm sure we'll show our usual profit next month."

"And just what is our usual profit, Tim?" Hammond had intended to make the question cautiously exploratory. Instead, his tone was heavy with slashing sarcasm.

"We aim at forty percent on the gross revenue, Mr. Hammond, sir, and I'm fully aware that we're not—"

Hammond dismissed the accountant weakly and slumped down in his chair, his face and hands wet with sudden sweat. Forty percent on the gross! No business made such a profit. This whole situation was a travesty of reality, grossly overdone.

For the first time Hammond wondered if this were the nightmare, rather than the nameless terror that had closed on his mind during the night. Conscientiously he tried to pull himself awake from the dream. He used every trick he could think of, but with no results.

As the initial shock subsided, Hammond began to adjust to the situation. Or, rather, the adjustment came

in spite of himself, as if he were speaking a part in a rather badly written play. The correct words, tone, and gesture came involuntarily, no matter what he intended. The rest of the players seemed to accept him quite seriously in the new characterization. Even when he tried to be himself—to act, at least, as he assumed he had six months ago—he was misinterpreted.

THE BOARD of Directors met this afternoon. The Red Arrow Line had never had such a board, to Hammond's knowledge, and the men who gathered in his office were strangers. Yet they knew him intimately. Furthermore, he seemed to know precisely how to preside; he was amazed at the lucid presentation he made of the unfinished business of the previous meeting—which, so far as he knew, he had not attended.

The Board Meeting, however, proved very instructive. Hammond learned that he was the president of the largest trucking line on the Pacific Coast. He had general offices in Portland, Seattle, San Diego, and Los Angeles, in addition to this terminal in San Francisco. He owned a fleet of freighters and cargo vessels, a commercial airline, and miscellaneous parcels of city real estate.

By all accounts, he was a captain of industry with a very unsavory personality. As a landlord of slum property, he took delight in evicting the destitute. He boasted of the blatant devices he used in order to evade his proper taxes, apparently so sure of his immunity that he could make the discussion a part of the Board minutes. And, finally, he seemed to take pride in the systematic cruelties he practiced toward his employees.

None of it was good business, as Hammond understood the term. Nor

was it his personality, as he understood himself. Yet nothing he did or said made any difference. The words he spoke were not his own; they were entirely divorced from the thought he intended. He was helplessly playing a role, and so was everyone else.

It was not insanity; Hammond was sure of that, because the internal logic of the situation was too highly integrated, the detail of reality too tangible. Something had happened, but not to him alone. The whole world around him had changed; to what extent, he was afraid to guess.

In the uncertainty, there was one thing he could cling to, his love for Irene. They had been married for ten years, and they were still as much in love as when they had their first high-school date. If Irene had not changed, the rest could become bearable.

He drove home slowly that afternoon, pushed by his anxiety to see Irene and reassure himself, and yet afraid to find out. Around him the city of San Francisco glittered in the golden sunlight, beautiful and unchanged—until he began to notice the bizarre differences.

The Ferry Building was enormous. The Top of the Mark was like a gigantic glass cube weighing down on the insignificant building beneath it. The presidio was a vast acreage of grass plots and old cannon. Knob Hill soared up like a craggy Everest, studded with sprawling, gleaming mansions. And tremendous, blazing neon signs, brighter even than the setting sun, proclaimed the location of the Barbary Coast and Chinatown. The rest of the city was indistinct in a gray haze.

San Francisco, as Hammond knew it, had given way to San Francisco as a tourist might have remembered it, or as an archeologist of the future might have reconstructed it from the

evidence of penny postcards.

MUCH THE same thing had happened to his home. Yet he knew that it was his. Yesterday's modestly comfortable white-walled bungalow had been transformed into a formal granite fortress, modeled on the Palace of Versailles. A tall, thin, aloof butler met him at the door.

"The master had a good day, I trust?"

"So-so, James. Is the madam ready?" It was by no means what Hammond had meant to say, but he was hardly surprised. He was growing used to playing his part. He began to feel that he was splitting into two people. One, himself, was being slowly driven out of the physical body named Albert Hammond by an aggressive stranger who seemed entirely at home in this weird world.

"She is waiting in the Red Room, sir."

Hammond found Irene standing by an elegant Louis XVI lounge, motionless in a blaze of sunlight. When Hammond opened the door of the Red Room, it was like the rising of a curtain on a new scene. He had the impression that she had been immobile and lifeless for an eternity, waiting for the moment of his coming which would bring her reality.

Hammond plunged into bitter despair, for only faintly did this woman resemble the Irene he knew. Dressed in a clinging, ornate evening gown, she was very young, sensuously beautiful and graceful. When she spoke her voice rang out with the tinkling music of a high-school girl, not the comfortable assurance of a mature woman.

"I was so afraid you might be late, Albert," she cooed. "We're going to the Berkeleys', you know."

"It's hard to get away early on Board Meeting day."

"Fortunately, you don't have to change, dear; none of the men are going formal." He hadn't heard her use those exact words, in that tone, since the night of their high-school prom. For a split second that forgotten quarrel was very vivid in his mind. She had changed her mind only when she found that none of the other boys were going to wear Tuxedos, but until the afternoon of the Prom she had threatened to go with someone else. What was his name? Willie. Willie Tuttle!

As he remembered the name, a pain stabbed into Hammond's mind, and vanished. It was like the dream that had crushed into his soul during the night, numbing, hypnotic, and terrifying.

Hammond knew neither the Berkeleys nor their guests, but the usurper who ruled his body seemed to be on excellent terms with them all. The party was quite in the romantic tradition of the gushiest of women's magazines. Hammond caught tantalizing scraps of talk that could have served as captions for full-page, full-color illustrations,

"I know my baby comes first, always, but does that mean that I must give up the only man I love?"

"Oh, Charles, must we part again, so soon—so terribly, terribly soon?"

"And then he swept me into his arms, and our lips met, warm and tender, pulsing with the purity of our new-found love."

Hammond was slowly nauseated by the appearance of the guests. The women were all alike, resembling Irene—polished, highly glazed adolescents, masquerading as women. And the men were pretty companion pieces, big, virile, young, heavily tanned, and forever smiling tenderly.

BUT, IN SPITE of himself, Hammond joined heartily with the others, mouthing inanities he would have held back if he could.

On the way home he found the courage to ask Irene about their two children. The question had been seething in his mind since he had returned from work, but he had been afraid to ask it. Now, though he guessed the truth and already writhed in its agony, he could not put it off.

"Tom and Jean?" Irene repeated, without understanding. "Who in the world are they, Albert?"

"Our children, Irene!"

"Are we supposed to have any?"

"Don't you know?"

"Why, Albert, you're joking! Of course not." She nestled close against his arm, like a starry-eyed girl on her first date, gently caressing his sleeve. "You're so big and strong, Albert; and it's so wonderful having you beside me. Wasn't the Berkeley party just scrumptious?"

The next day Hammond saw a psychiatrist. He was a good man, highly recommended by Dr. Betts. While Hammond talked, he listened patiently. Afterwards he laced his fingers and leaned back in his leather chair, pursing his lips.

"A fascinating delusion, Mr. Hammond," he conceded. "I've never encountered another case quite like it."

"Then these things aren't real?"

"On the contrary, they are all very real. It's this other thing—this normal world, as you call it—that makes your story interesting. In most psychiatric situations, the patient escapes from the everyday world by building an hallucination for himself. You have done the reverse. You see the world around you exactly as it is, but you're convinced that it is an illusion."

"But I do have two children, doc-

tor—two of the finest kids you've ever seen! And now Irene tells me—"

"The children, too, are part of your delusion."

"This—this reality is a distortion of everything I've ever known!"

"Mr. Hammond, there is an external reality of material things which we all know and share. But a person's only contact with external reality is through the interpretations of his own senses. You see and feel and hear the things around you, just as I do, but your own mind gives meaning to the sensations. If the meaning you get is reasonably like everyone else's, we say you are normal and sane. That's the only basis for judgment that we have. For all I know, we might all be quite wrong. But my point is this: in actual fact, what each of us does is create our own private universes. This delusion of yours is that sort of thing. It is your world as you would make it ideally, not as it is."

The psychiatrist got up, extending his hand. "I'm going to prescribe a lot of rest and relaxation for you, Mr. Hammond. For a while, don't live your business problems so intensely. Get out and enjoy yourself more. Come and see me in a week or so and we'll see how you're feeling then."

The psychiatrist was Hammond's last resort, and he had answered nothing. Hammond left the office frustrated by the words and utterly bewildered.

THE FIRST day set the pattern for Hammond for nearly a week. His business life consisted of making monotonously caddish coups which always turned out to be enormously profitable. And every night Hammond and Irene went out, or entertained themselves. It was an exhaustive routine, but Hammond felt no fatigue. His

sleep was sound and dreamless.

Dreamless, except that once he awoke in the early morning hours, screaming aloud the name of Willie Tuttle. He couldn't remember why he felt so terrified, why his body was cold with sweat. But the name clung tenaciously to his mind.

Willie Tuttle! Hammond remembered him vaguely as a mousy, insignificant, dreamy boy who had gone to high school with him and Irene. He hadn't seen Willie in fifteen years. Yet the name rang so persistently in his thoughts, Hammond wanted to find him again. Somehow he was sure that Willie could explain the transformation that had taken place in the world.

In the morning Hammond telephoned the high school and began the slow process of tracing Willie through the series of mediocre jobs he had held since graduation. It was two days before he found that Willie was currently employed by the Red Arrow Line as a biller in the Los Angeles office. Hammond determined to summon him to San Francisco the next day.

But that night he had his second nightmare.

Insensible to every stimulus except the choking fog he was fighting slowly out of his mind, Hammond dragged himself through another morning routine. It was routine in the sense that he knew by instinct what he must do, but he was also aware that his environment was totally different once again.

He bolted a breakfast of cereal and toast at a battered kitchen table, with Irene and their two brawling children. There was no time for family niceties. As usual, they were all just a little late. Irene, work-worn and tired, wearing a faded dressing gown that was splattered with stove grease, tried ineffectually to keep peace at the ta-

ble. Hammond—again as usual—stormed and threatened punishment, but the bickering of the children went right on.

Irene kissed him and handed him his scarred mailbag. He banged out of the house and climbed into his car. The motor whined and whined and finally started. Hammond clattered out of the drive, narrowly missing the scrawny palm that grew in the parkway—as he always did.

When he was able to think rationally, he found that he was on the Glendale-Los Angeles Freeway, and he was driving a Ford, twelve years old. Acrid banks of smog blotted out the city of Los Angeles, yet Hammond knew precisely where he was going. He was a junior rate clerk in the Los Angeles terminal of the Red Arrow Line. It was a job he had held for a decade, without promotion and afraid to quit because he had a family to support.

The situation was understandably sound and logical. The only thing wrong was that it was also quite mad. Yet, if he were insane, would the appearance of this new environment have seemed so very tangible? He could feel the worn seat covers beneath his thighs; he could see the blistered, faded paint on the exterior of the sedan. The bent left fender—he remembered smashing it on a foggy night, five years ago. The stain on the back seat—he remembered how Jean had spilled her bottle there when she was still a baby.

IF THIS were an illusion, it came equipped with a detailed and integrated peripheral reality. A week ago he had felt that he was being split into two persons; now it was three. He had distinct memories of three entirely separate pasts; three distinct personalities, three separate

worlds were crowded into the physical being of Albert Hammond. If only one of them were real, as other people defined reality, which of the three was it?

The shock of the second transformation was minimized by the memory of the first. Hammond proceeded cautiously to feel his way into this new world, but the caution was unnecessary. He could draw upon an accumulation of past experiences as the underpaid, overworked rate clerk for the Red Arrow Line. He did his day's work without a hitch.

He went home to the familiar nagging of an overcrowded house and a family trapped by the bitterness of economic mediocrity. None of the equipment in the tiny jerry-built cottage functioned properly. Doors sagged and squeaked. The refrigerator clattered so that it shook the paper-thin walls. The ancient radio spluttered and faded and sometimes did not work at all. The plumbing either dripped or was plugged up, and the floor lamps waved back and forth when anyone strode across the living room.

The children had no place to play except the living room, and they quarreled continuously over their few cheap toys. Irene was always worn out by her daily conflict with the house, and the strain of stretching a slim budget to meet the needs of a family of four.

Hammond no longer had the feeling that he was playing a part. He had full control of what he said, and he could have asked Irene for any explanation he wanted. But it was impossible to talk to her. In this world their love had died years ago beneath the steady hammering of work.

This was a special night, apparently, for as soon as the dinner dishes

were cleared away, Irene said she was going in to dress.

"I made over the blue that Mrs. Slovena gave me," she said. "I think it'll do. You'll wear your Sunday suit, won't you, Al?"

"Are we—are we going out?" Something fixed in his memory told him that the question was superfluous, but he couldn't place the details.

"Don't tell me you've forgotten!" Irene's voice was shrill with anger, yet she was close to tears. "It's the Red Arrow anniversary dinner, and we're invited."

"Oh, yes." Comfortingly he tried to put his arm around her, but she shrugged him away.

"Willie Tuttle only invited us for old time's sake, because we all went to high school together."

"Willie Tuttle?"

"Just the president of the company, that's all. And he asked us on his own personal stationery! Oh, Albert, maybe you'll have a chance to put in a word about your job!"

The anniversary dinner was held in the Beverly-Wilshire. It was definitely a big-time affair. The mayor, the governor, a delegation of Congressmen, Hollywood stars, and lesser politicians were crowded at the table of honor, like celestial dignitaries at the feet of President Tuttle. Willie himself ate in a blaze of spotlights, seated on a level slightly higher than his guests. Hammond and Irene were shabby poor relations in so much glitter. They were grateful to have a tiny table hidden away in the rear of the room.

THE SPEECHES were long and monotonously identical. Governor, mayor, and assembled Congressmen all lavished ecstatic praise on Willie Tuttle for his services to

mankind, to business, and to the great and glorious State of California. Through it all Willie basked in the spotlight, modestly sipping gallons of champagne and smiling upon the multitude after each rousing round of applause.

When the speeches were over the cloth-of-gold curtain at one end of the room was pulled back, revealing the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, which had come to play for the dancing. Followed by his halo of spotlights, Willie Tuttle walked the length of the hall toward Hammond and Irene.

His progress was slow because guests kept crowding around him crying for his autograph. With a gracious flourish, Willie always obliged. As he came closer, Hammond saw that Willie was amazingly handsome, combining qualities of Charles Atlas, Allan Ladd, and Tyrone Power with the atmospheric culture of Ronald Colman.

Hammond arose and went to meet him. Willie was related to the weird series of transformations that had overturned Hammond's life and, despite the throng, Hammond intended to force an explanation from him. The two men met in front of Hammond's table. Willie was smiling broadly, exuding an air of success. But when Hammond tried to speak, to ask the questions crowding his mind, he mumbled and stuttered helplessly. Once again he knew he was playing a part.

"How do you like it with things reversed, Al? Which of us do you think Irene would choose now?"

The thought was Willie's, but somehow he had spoken to Hammond without saying the words aloud. In that instant Hammond understood many things, as if Willie had suddenly told him the drab story of his life—of his yearning, his frustration, his bungling incompetence; of his bitter

envy of Hammond's success; and of his driving desire for Irene.

The realization came in a flash and was gone. Subservient and servile, Hammond stepped back, bowing a little as Willie moved toward the table and Irene. Irene stood up, her tired face radiant, her lips trembling.

Willie stopped, staring at her. His smile faded. His face drained of color. As it did, a flood of energy flowed into Hammond's soul as if he had been released from an invisible bondage. He clenched his fists and sprang at Willie. Indecisive and frightened, Willie backed away; but his hesitation was momentary. He paused and cried out in anguish,

"No; no! This won't work! It has to be done differently!"

As if the projected scene of a motion picture had been suddenly stilled, the activity and sound in the banquet hall became frozen and immobile. Dancers stood like statues; waiters were dead, in the act of removing dishes from tables; the curtain, waving in the wind, hung like a thing made of grass; and the air throbbed with the single note the orchestra had been playing when the paralysis came upon them.

Hammond was lifeless, like the others; a part of his mind went blank, but his two other worlds remained intact. Hammond saw the room as a picture, hidden in the depth of a body of water. Only Willie Tuttle had life. Willie looked for a moment at the lifeless statues around him, and then he approached Irene.

HE FINGERED her straggling hair; he ran his hand over the wrinkled gray skin of her face; he lifted her hand and touched the reddened callouses. When Willie looked up, he was crying. Furiously he lashed out at Irene, to sweep her

aside, but his swinging arms passed through her body like knives cleaving quiet water.

Willie stepped back, surveying the motionless throng. As he reached a decision a sly smile crept over his face. With a flick of his wrist he removed one of the men standing near Hammond's table and replaced him with a dignified, white-haired gentleman.

He turned and faced Hammond, grinning.

In a burst of light and sound, motion came back to the room, but the time element had been altered. Hammond was back at the point where he went to face Willie and force an explanation from him.

A thick, pulsing hatred arose within Hammond, like the quaking of an unleashed volcano. He began to shout into Willie's smirking face, crying that Willie did not own the Red Arrow Line, that it belonged to him, to Albert Hammond. He would have smashed his knuckles into Willie's gleaming teeth, but men rose on all sides to hold him back.

They carried him, screaming, into an empty lounge. As Hammond's rage subsided, he saw that the dignified, white-haired gentleman was with him.

"Feeling better, Mr. Hammond?"

"I guess I did go off my rocker a little, didn't I?"

"It sometimes happens if we work too hard. Mr. Tuttle asked me to tell you he won't press any charges, but if there's a repetition of this outburst he'll take steps to have you committed."

"The strange thing is, I—somehow I know I'm right! I do own the company, but I live in San Francisco and my wife—"

"Mr. Hammond, we all day-dream. It's normal for a man to envy his

boss and to imagine how things would be if he were in his place. Our dreams are our own private worlds. We can build them as we like, fill them with puppets of our own making. But it's madness if you allow yourself to confuse your own dream-world with reality."

"A psychiatrist told me that same thing almost a week ago, in San Francisco—but I owned the company, then."

"I'm advising you to get a lot of rest, Mr. Hammond. If this happens again, you won't get off so easily. I'll give you a tablet to take before you go to bed tonight."

Hammond drove back to Glendale in a seething storm of disgrace. Irene's quarrelsome voice picked fitfully at the bones of his brief and one-sided battle with Willie. She heaped high her scorn and denunciation, never pausing for breath, never asking him for his explanation.

Hammond took the sleeping tablet and went to bed. Irene was still talking. Twice she shook him awake to tell him again how much he had embarrassed her and to demand,

"Whatever can we do, now? Of course Willie won't keep you on at the office after this!"

Eventually Irene ran through even her score of bitterness and the tiny, dismal bedroom fell silent. Hammond dozed and the tension in his muscles began to relax. To sleep was to forget. To sleep was to—

TO DREAM! He jerked himself back to consciousness, fighting the creeping paralysis of the drug. When he slept he was helpless, trapped by the nightmares that overturned his world. He sat up, staring at the pattern of light the corner

streetlamp threw on the bedroom ceiling.

Very slowly he began to understand what had happened. A madman created a dream-world and escaped into it, and for him that world was real; it would be real, too, from the point of view of the dream itself.

Hammond, then, had become caught in dream-worlds made by someone else.

Willie Tuttle! These were his puppet universes, the gaudy delusions of a futile, ineffectual, timid nonentity, envying Hammond his success and his possession of Irene. The first transformation had framed Hammond's San Francisco existence in the romantic nonsense Willie botched together out of his restricted experiences and his imagination. And the second had reduced Hammond to a poverty and a drabness comparable to Willie's. Willie had meant, then, to move across the stage, a glittering lion of success, captivate Irene, and snatch her away. But Willie's dream went wrong, because Irene necessarily had to share Hammond's economic environment. Willie found her an undesirable, work-worn wench, the only possible product of the world Willie had given her.

Willie's only solution was to create another dream in a hurry. He used the white-haired gentleman to engineer a situation which would force Hammond to take a sleeping pill. Willie hadn't had recourse to that particular trick before, but he was apparently frightened and rattled now. He couldn't be sure that Hammond had not guessed the truth, and the only time Willie could bring about the transformation was while Hammond slept.

Hammond dragged himself out of

bed, sluggishly fighting off the drug. If Willie could make the dreams, he could unmake them, too. Hammond had some slight control of the situation now. He knew Willie was staying at the Biltmore. If he could get his hands on Willie, Hammond could force him to restore his own world of reality. Perhaps that was as much an illusion as this, but at least Hammond was at home there and held dominion over his own destiny.

Hammond drove back to Los Angeles. The encroaching weariness rose up against him like an invisible force. He fought it with all his strength, but it was a losing battle.

He left his car in an all-night lot on Hill Street and reeled through Pershing Square toward the Biltmore. He staggered drunkenly, as if his feet were trapped in a sea of mud. His breath came in gasps. His heart lurched.

He dropped on a green bench to rest and he did not get up. His head fell on his chest. The screaming nightmare closed over his mind.

But a spark of himself stayed doggedly alive, whispering over and over again, "This is not real; this is not real." Desperately Hammond seized upon it, while the storm of the dream raged across his soul; the steady whisper gave him courage. Slowly he began to build upon it. If the torment were not real, he could dismiss it simply by refusing to accept it.

TO DREAM! He jerked himself and then a shout of triumph. Abruptly his fatigue passed. Hammond stood up and looked at the square. All motion was frozen into the one-dimensional reality of a photograph. The leaves on the trees stood still. The water of the fountain hung

in midair, clear crystal tears without weight.

This was Willie's world. By the strength of his conviction, of his belief in himself, Hammond could destroy it. To believe, however, was a desperate struggle against his own established concepts of reality. For a long time he stood where he was, as motionless as the rest of the picture; but the conviction mounted slowly in his mind, and slowly he found that he could walk.

Hesitantly he began to pull the world apart. The edges of the picture blurred into a gray shadow, folding inward like sheets of water. Suddenly he saw Willie running toward him across the square.

"No; no!" Willie screamed. In spite of his effort, he ran sluggishly, fighting the force that dragged against him. When he came close to Hammond, he was livid from exertion. "Leave it be, Hammond, if you want to save either of us!"

"If you can make this dream, Willie, I can destroy it."

"Yes; yes, now that you know how. But, when you do, you'll create a vacuum. There'll be nothing to take its place."

"I don't like your dream, Willie. I want to get back to my own."

Willie pulled himself up and spoke with courage, although his face paled. "You have to depend on me to do that, Hammond, and I'll never do it. I'd rather have the other thing."

"The other thing?"

"Look!" Willie gestured vaguely. Already the buildings in the background had peeled away; the trees were fading, colorless; the brick walks were graying into indistinctness. An emptiness, like a thick fog, was closing around the two men.

"I can create for myself, then," Hammond said.

"You haven't the ability!"

"If I can wipe out your world, why can't I make my own?"

"Because you know you're part of my dream; since you really believe that, you can destroy it. But you're too practical, Hammond, too much the materialist to believe that much in your own. You can erase what I've made; that's as far as you can go. You're too normal to accomplish the other thing; you believe too much in the external reality of things."

Furiously Hammond advanced on Willie. Willie backed away, still talking, still pleading. Underneath a hedge Hammond stumbled upon an electric clipper left there by a park gardener. He picked it up and swung the blade. Willie cringed and screamed. Hammond swung again, and the clipper hit Willie's head. In a final frenzy of angry words, Willie vanished. His world went with him. Hammond stood alone in a vast, gray-white emptiness. He stood on nothing. He felt nothing. He moved freely, but he moved in no direction.

Willie's dream was gone.

Hammond began to create his own. He tried to visualize Irene, their white-walled bungalow, the two-year-old Buick, and the children that he loved. Very faintly the house began to take shape in the mist, but it disappeared when a new thought occurred to him.

IF HE COULD make the world as he wanted it, why not create perfection? He began with the things he thought he needed: wealth, prestige, power, good health; and he discarded them all. He had grown up in a universe in turmoil, among shouting demagogues and in the thunder of war. The one thing above others that he

had learned to desire was security.

Begin with that, then. Make his universe absolutely secure in all things.

He built up the image in his mind, but the gray mist did not lift. He knew that he could create as he pleased; he believed that as he had believed that he could shatter Willie's dream. Yet still the mist held fast.

After a time he was exhausted. He thought that he slept for a while, but he could not be sure. When he awoke, the mist was still there. He knew that hours had passed, but he felt no hunger, no discomfort, nothing except the cold touch of the gray mist.

No discomfort! Then this was the thing that he had created, a universe of absolute security. He was forever safe—and forever alone.

Security by itself meant nothing, then. It was one half of a balanced scale. Security became meaningless unless it was opposed to insecurity.

As he reached that conclusion, the gray fog began to stir. He knew he had found the way back. For a moment he was tempted to pursue the security of absolute power, and a tentative world took form, but it was a madness of screaming adulation for an aloof godhead that was himself. He fled from it back into the blankness of the mist.

He did not want perfection, then, but the semblance of it which he once had had.

The white house took shape. He saw the sun warming the lawn. The colors brightened. He saw children playing in the drive. The detail of the picture took form. He heard the sound of birds in the trees, the splutter of a distant motor on the highway, the whine of a lawn mower.

From out of the void he moved into the house. He saw the white, emaciated form lying on the bed, motionless

under the sheets. Slowly that form became himself. Irene was bending over him as he opened his eyes. He became aware of the bandages that bound his shoulder, of the pain throbbing in his throat.

"You're going to be all right, Al," Irene said. Her hand was cool and soft on his forehead.

"What happened?" His voice was husky, his throat sand dry.

"Yesterday, when we were working in the garden, a man sprang at you from a break in the hedge. He tried to kill you, dear."

"I—I don't remember, Irene."

"No wonder; the doctor gave you a

sedative! In an hour or so you'll be feeling more yourself again."

"Someone tried to kill me? Why, Irene?"

"Goodness knows. He was drunk, I think. You beat him off with the hedge clipper, but he cut your throat very badly with a broken bottle."

"Who was it, Irene? Do I know him?"

"That's the strangest part of it, Al. It was Willie Tuttle. Remember him? He went to high school with us. I almost gave him a date once, for the Junior Prom."

THE END

(Continued from page 39)

The traitor Lura thought to use it to destroy what the Ancients had built. But the Ancients were all-wise and built in me the power to destroy the field should any try to usurp it. Thallom must now remain unmoving in space, unless you command that I restore the energy field. Such is the Law."

Blaine looked down at the girl. Her eyes were glowing with a proud light now. She shook her head slowly at the great robot. "Let the field remain dead, O Sacred Robot. Thallom may find a home in this solar system and its people live in peace and flourish with the life-giving energies of the sun-star called Sol."

The robot's voice came sonorously. "So be it, my Queen. Rule Thallom wisely, and gain counsel in the Sacred Chamber. The Earthman may leave in peace."

Noreen took Blaine's hand then and walked with him across the great pages of the Book of Law. They passed the shield of Targal emblazoned in the metal plates and she paused to gaze back at the line of statuary behind them.

"My father's likeness will be there soon," she said reverently.

Blaine nodded. "You will make a great queen, Noreen."

She looked up at him. "And what of you, Rex Blaine? Will you be returning to your own planet now with your other Earthmen?"

Blaine nodded. "I will. And I will tell my people of your great race and of the tenth planet in our system. Together we will build a mighty solar family...."

"Together?" her voice was low. "Will you return then to Thallom?"

He took her tenderly in his arms. "I will return, Noreen. The whole universe could not keep me from you. Not even the seal of the Targal or your Sacred Robot."

She smiled wistfully up at him. "The Targal, Rex? No Targal has done more for Thallom than you. And our son shall be the greatest Targal of all...someday...."

Her lips were close to his then, and he met them with his own.

And beneath them the great seal of the Targals of Thallom glowed. The sealed portals of the chamber swung open for them and they left the great Robot and walked out into the city and the cheering multitudes awaiting them....

"OUT OF THIS DUST..."



**Lan drove his Rad-tank into
New Haldon with a sense of dread—
would these people shun him too? . . .**



Latest U.S. Government
tests of all cigarettes
show True is
lower in both
tar and nicotine
than 98% of all other
cigarettes sold.

Think about it.
Shouldn't your next cigarette be True?

Regular: 12 mg. "tar", 0.8 mg. nicotine,
Menthol: 12 mg. "tar", 0.7 mg. nicotine, av. per cigarette, FTC Report Aug. '72.



Latest U.S. Government
tests of all menthol
cigarettes show
True is lower
in both tar and
nicotine than 98% of
all other menthols sold.

Think about it.
Shouldn't your next cigarette be True?

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined
That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.

By Charles Recour

"WILL it always be like this?"

The question emanated from Lan Thanson's tightly twisted lips, compressed in mingled anger and despair. It bounced off the dull aluminum walls of the interior of the Rad-tank and seemed to whisper back again to the grim youth.

"Will it always be like this?"

The rustle and slither of his lead-impregnated plastic coverall was the only other sound that mingled with the desperate words, as Lan peered once more through the quartz and plastiglass slit that was the vision port of the radiation tank. Lan's gaze was riveted on the pastoral scene that confronted him.



The rubber-sheathed treads of the radiation tank rested squarely in the middle of a shining ribbon of concrete that ran through this hilly, wooded area. Lan felt for a moment as though he were in another world. Here was no mass of shattered rubble and twisted steel. Here was no stench of decaying flesh. Here, man's handiwork was recognizable only in the concrete roadway—and the sign . . .

The cause of Lan's preoccupation and despair stood almost on the side of the road. It was a neat metal sign—aluminum, Lan guessed—and it was neatly lettered.

"Warning," it said, in bold, black letters. Then: "Do not enter this area. This is the Free Community of New Haldon. We will not tolerate strange entry—whether radiation-free or contaminated. Observers failing to heed this notice will subject themselves to Military Action. This Free Community is fully militarized!"

Directly beneath this warning, the words were repeated in the language Lan had learned as well as his native English—Asiatican. Dully his eyes read the repetition.

His pondering was interrupted by another sound. The chirp of a bird. Lan ran his glove-sheathed hand over the stubble on his chin.

God, he thought, they *do* have a radiation-free community. Even animal life is reproducing.

For one brief moment the six years of the Atomic Wars disappeared and Lan was once more a human being instead of a soldier. He saw himself at school. The theoretical physics in which he was trained appeared as an academic exercise, not a training for a future war. Life was to be lived and enjoyed. Men were brothers.

The vision vanished and Lan heard the high shrill whine of the Pan-

Asiatican rockets whining overhead, carrying their burdens of destruction to the cities of the world. Simultaneously with their detection, the answer was given, and but a few moments later, the cities of Pan-Asiatica flared brilliant beneath the exploding of atomic bombs, even as North Americans—those that were left—were viewing the ruins of their own cities.

Then had come the invasion and counter-invasion of Asiatica and North America. Armies destroyed each other and died in the products of their own lethal radiation-producing bombs and torpedoes. The technologists of both forces gradually disintegrated until the sight of a rocket overhead was a rarity. Still enough buried cities and factories, hidden in the closest isolation, managed to produce the deadly implements of modern war.

Finally, even these identities were merged with death and destruction as highly-skilled, completely mobile bands of radiation soldiers tracked down the production lairs of each other—and destroyed them. Now the Earth, Europa, Pan-Asiatica, North America, South America, Austro-Con—all were peculiar areas of death, laden with the destructive seeds of radiation products, livable only in spots. Men were few and far between and communities almost non-existent.

Lan's military unit ended as such when in a furious battle with Pan-Asiatic patrols, it was destroyed along with them. Lan was the single survivor, untouched by radiation. Pure chance had protected him.

BITTERLY, as these thoughts mandered through Lan's mind, his eyes fell on the stained nameplate on the instrument panel. What had happened to the city which had forged this Rad-tank? The words, "Im Essen fabri-

ziert," were distinguishable. That city, too, was quietly settling into rust and ruin, Lan was sure.

Lan flipped the transparent helmet over his head, checked the magazines of his machine pistol and his sub-machine gun, opened the hatch of the tank and stepped out.

He hadn't been out of the tank for two days, and the air that came through his filter tasted particularly good. He glanced cautiously around and stepped into the shelter of the woods. He kept his eyes on his radiation tank. It was his home, his shelter, his only hope of survival in this weird unnatural world.

For ten minutes, Lan debated what to do—as if any debate was necessary. He knew there was only one answer. He would turn the tank around and leave, hoping against hope that there would be some other community in which the fires of hatred and war had died down sufficiently for it to accept a stranger. Lan wanted to be among his own kind. If he tried to enter this community, he knew he would be burned out instantly.

Reluctantly, he slid his lean body back into the pilot seat of the radiation tank. He flipped the switch marked *Zündung—Ignition*—and there was the soft hiss of burning fuel. The rapid-heating high pressure boiler came up to temperature and the tank was ready to roll.

Slowly Lan wheeled it in the direction from which he had come.

"So long, New Haldon," he said softly, and there was no bitterness in his voice, only an infinite sorrow.

The tank rolled along the ribbon of concrete for a number of miles. Then Lan drove it off the road into the dense forest thickets. He stopped the engine. A plan had come to him. He was determined to encounter his own kind. Besides, he felt the need for a bath and knowing the area was radiation-free, he

could safely take one in the nearest stream.

He checked with the Geiger-Miller. It was clicking slowly and casually—ordinary cosmic stuff. There was nothing harmful here.

Re-arming himself, and in addition, taking a few grenades, Lan left the tank once more. He made sure it was sufficiently hidden. Then he strode into the woods.

Here was no evidence of "man's inhumanity to man." Instead, all was peace and quiet. Occasionally bird-sounds could be heard. Sunlight filtering through tree-tops cast beautiful patterns of light and shade. It was a world which missed nothing but human companionship. The greatest loss of all, Lan knew.

As he stepped through a plot of underbrush he found himself suddenly on the bank of a small stream. Its pure crystalline water sparkled, and it flowed rapidly enough to gurgle. Lan smiled at the small sounds.

His Geiger-Miller showed no variation in radiation intensity. It was safe. Making sure that he could not be seen any great distance, Lan rapidly stripped to the skin. In a minute he had plunged into the stream.

The water was cold, and his dirty body, overheated in the compactness of his radiation suit, shivered at the outrage.

Making as little noise as was possible and using his one remaining bar of soap salvaged from some burnt-out kit, Lan thoroughly scrubbed himself, wallowing in the luxury of being free of his armaments for the while. He wasted no time.

As soon as he could, he reclothed himself, only then feeling secure. With no definite purpose in mind, he decided to follow the course of the stream for a way.

Noting that it was well into the afternoon, he knew it would not be wise to spend too much time here. And there was always the possibility that someone might discover the Rad-tank.

Stepping through a tangle of dense foliage, Lan stopped suddenly. Wearing little more than a colorful plastic tunic and with her feet dangling in the cool waters of the stream, a girl sat on the bank reading a book. She was completely immersed in her reading, and Lan hastily stepped back, concealing himself.

THE idiocy of the scene made him want to laugh aloud. As if she had no worries whatsoever on her mind, the girl sat calmly, enjoying herself. Lan felt the pangs of envy. His heart quickened at the sight of her beauty. The longer he looked the more impressed he was. She was no more than twenty, her skin a lovely tawny golden, her hair a brilliant yellow. She was such a woman as he had not seen in years.

This girl had never been singed by the fiery products of radiation. Her book, her brief clothing, the sandal-like shoes at her side, and the small holstered pistol testified to the fact that she came from a still competent cultural group. Perhaps she was a member of the New Haldon community.

Lan rejected the idea. She would certainly not be left as unguarded as this. He wanted to approach her, yet he dared not. She would either cry out in alarm or give some warning. Possibly she would even attempt to kill him, in which case he would be forced to kill her, and that he didn't want to do. Beauty was too rare in Lan's life for him to want to destroy any part of it. So he waited and watched. Occasionally she shifted her position, her movements a fluid grace, and Lan's heart beat faster with a strange desire.

Still he waited and watched. An hour passed.

Abruptly the girl put down the book, marking her place with a leaf. Lan smiled at the gesture. Once he had done the same—a million years ago. She reached up, stretched, and yawned, and the muscular effort did things to pronounce her figure.

The girl stood up, strapping the holstered weapon around her waist. She picked up the book and started along the stream away from Lan. Lan followed her, always keeping sufficiently behind to avoid detection. Once she turned and for a moment Lan thought she knew she was being followed. She stopped, a puzzled frown on her face. She shook her head as if to banish an unpleasant thought and then proceeded on her way.

A half hour's walk brought her to a twisted mass of concrete and steel. Lan recognized it as the remnants of a town. Hardly a single wall was left standing. Rust and ruin were everywhere and already the forest and grasses had started to encroach on the ruins.

Here and there the torn and twisted framework of an aircraft or a rocket shell could be seen. The girl seemed to know her way around, for she threaded through the ruins with confidence. Lan followed, every now and then glancing at his Geiger-Miller to assure himself of radiation freedom.

The girl seemed to have no purpose in mind. She paused in the middle of the ruined town and gazed about. An expression of pity and sadness crossed her face. Somehow Lan felt glad.

Lan dropped quickly to the ground. Forty feet away from the girl and behind her to one side, Lan detected motion. He watched carefully. Something was moving. He wanted to cry out but he dared not for fear he'd throw the girl into a panic. He remained silent,

but he released the safety on the sub-machine gun.

The girl sat down on a rock, completely unaware that anything was happening.

Into Lan's gaze, there slowly and cautiously came a figure, a figure which Lan hadn't seen alive for a long time. It was a powerfully built Asiatican soldier, clad much as Lan was in radiation-gas-proof suit, armed in much the same manner and from his movements, as confident that he was alone with the girl, as Lan had been a few minutes before.

The soldier gingerly stepped through the rubble covered ground, careful to make no sound. Slowly he crept upon the girl. He had observed her pistol, for he kept an automatic rifle at the ready.

Anxiously Lan looked around for companions. There were none that he could see. Still, it was unlikely that the Asiatican was alone.

LAN brought his sub-machine gun to his shoulder and put the sights on the Asiatican's back. Once again he was about to be the executioner and the thought did not appeal to him. The war had been too devastating for him to retain any hatred of an Asiatican as such. Now he only thought of him as a menace to the girl.

The Asiatican was not twelve feet from the girl when she turned and saw him. Her mouth opened in surprise. At the same instant she reached for the holstered pistol. And like a flash the Asiatican leaped toward her.

The flat crack of Lan's gun was drowned by the roar of the exploding bullet. The Asiatican's upper half vanished in a flare of bursting flesh and rending flame.

The girl, blown off her feet by the explosion, retained her presence of

mind. Like a cat she was back on her feet, this time the pistol in her hand.

She leveled it at Lan, who walked slowly toward her, his sub-machine gun hanging from his right arm. He stopped ten feet from her.

"I'm Radiation Officer Lan Thanson," he said slowly, marveling at the sound of his own voice, "formerly commanding an offense unit—now dead and dispersed. I am radiation-free." He pointed to the counter strapped to his side.

The girl's suspicious look relaxed very slightly. She kept the pistol pointed at him.

"I'm Seryl Crane," she said simply, "a New Haldonite. New Haldon is—"

"I know," Lan interrupted her, "I saw your welcome sign," he said wryly.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but you know how difficult it is."

"I know," Lan said again, "the wars have changed people . . ."

"We can't help it. Do you want us to take in every stray? How can a community revive, if it expands beyond its limits? We're only beginning."

"Of course it can't. But there's no use talking about it. Get back to your community. I'm going back to my Rad-tank. There are probably more of these things around." He touched the remains of the Asiatican with his toe.

"Yes," she said, "I suppose I should go." Lan detected a pitying note in her voice, and it irritated him. Then suddenly he stiffened.

"Get down, Seryl. Down!"

The girl dropped beside him at the warning. Lan motioned for silence, and pointed.

Figures were moving in the nearby woods.

"They probably heard the shot," he whispered. He paused. "I have a suggestion," he added, "but you don't have to take it."

She looked at him, her eyes seeking to fathom his. "Yes?"

"I'm going back to the Rad-tank. It's the only safe spot around here. You can come with me if you want to."

She hesitated for a moment. Then she said:

"All right. I will go with you. I think I can trust you . . ."

He hadn't wondered at her apparent lack of gratitude. He was too familiar with the fact that she had assumed he had saved her for one reason—for himself.

Crawling through the ruins on their bellies they made almost invisible objects and it was not long before they reached the sanctuary of the woods and located the stream which they would have to follow back to the Rad-tank.

As soon as they were surrounded by sufficient foliage, they stood erect and Lan urged her to follow him as fast as she could.

WHEN they reached the spot where the Rad-tank stood, Lan paused and surveyed the situation. They could see the Rad-tank still well hidden and apparently undisturbed.

Seryl nudged Lan. "Look!" she warned. On the opposite side of the Rad-tank were three Asiaticans, fully armed and armored. They were talking among themselves much as if they were awaiting someone.

Lan's nerves were tense. This was not going to be easy. At all costs they must get into the Rad-tank. If they didn't, there was almost no hope of evading the Asiaticans or standing up to them.

He looked at the girl. The hesitation which had marked her original distrust was gone. Instead, she was looking at him with a hopeful smile.

Confidence surged back into Lan. He knew what he had to do now. He

could see the three heads over the top of the tank, still engaged in conversation.

"Come," he whispered to Seryl, "we'll get them from the other side where we can't miss. Are you afraid?"

"No," she said simply. "I'm not afraid at all, Rad-off Thanson."

Lan smiled at her use of his military title. It had been a long time since anyone had addressed him that way.

Moving slowly, they worked their way around to the other side of the Rad-tank. Never before did its battle-scarred bulk look more attractive. Did the armorers in Essen who had forged it so long ago, ever think that it would serve a purpose here, Lan wondered?

The forty millimeter gun protruding from the top turret looked ominous and menacing. The terrible explosive shells it shot could wreak havoc anywhere.

Once on the other side of the tank, Lan looked at Seryl as he brought up the muzzle of his sub-machine gun. She turned her head away. Familiarly, Lan's finger set the catch to "automatic."

He pressed the trigger.

A half-dozen shots sped into the group of Asiaticans. Accuracy was not necessary. The three men never knew what happened. They simply disintegrated into torn masses of bone and flesh as the explosive bullets shredded them in coruscant blasts of flame and force.

At his side, Lan felt the girl shudder. He looked down at the weapon in his hand. How many men had it destroyed? He dared not think about it.

"All right," he said, "let's get into the tank."

In a matter of a minute they were esconced safely behind its explosive and radiation-proof walls.

"I'll drive, Seryl," Lan said. "Do you want to sit in the turret?"

"We may need this gun, Lan," Seryl said determinedly. "I might as well learn to use it."

Lan quickly explained its mechanism. There was nothing to do except sight it, and even then explosive shells did most of the work.

THE Rad-tank moved smoothly and rapidly along the concrete ribbon toward the sign that had so annoyed Lan.

"Has New Haldon any weapons to match this?" he asked.

"We have plenty of rocket equipment" Seryl said, "ground stuff, that is, but deadly. We haven't had to use it yet, but I'm sure we can fight off the average attacker."

"That's good," Lan agreed, "because I think there are more of those devils, and I don't like it at all. They must have set up some sort of central agency for Asiaticans. By now most of them should be broken up into bands as little as ours."

Seryl explained the social organization of New Haldon, of which Lan already had a good idea. It was a hopeful sign that such communities were springing up everywhere. The only unfavorable thing about it, he thought, was the fact that the communities almost always regarded any stranger as an enemy. The Wars had done that to people.

"Will it ever stop?" Seryl mused aloud.

"There is hope," Lan said. "Especially when it is possible to see a beautiful girl reading a book by a stream . . ."

Seryl blushed.

"What were you reading?" Lan asked, his hands automatically manipulating the Rad-tank controls.

"It—it was a love story," she finally admitted, the blush deepening her tan.

Lan didn't laugh; "I understand

that," he said simply, "I know."

How long had he stayed away from books of all kinds, much less love stories? It was a reassuring thing to know that human beings still believed in the fundamentals and took pleasure in the simple, common things.

Lan forced his mind to return to the immediacy of the situation. The tank rolled powerfully along the concrete roadway and when they passed the sign, Lan suddenly jammed on the brakes. There was the harsh screech as the vehicle ground to a halt. Along the road in front of them squatted dozens of Asiaticans, in all states of preparation for war. Weapons were being cleaned, radiation suits were being checked, commands were being given. It was a military camp preparing for the march.

To one side of the road lay a half dozen bodies. "New Haldonites," Seryl said, and there was a bitterness in her voice.

Lan reacted rapidly.

"Fire!" he shouted to Seryl while his own side guns started to chatter their refrain of death.

The startled Asiaticans scattered in a vain effort to escape the rain of fire sweeping down on them. It was hopeless. Some got away as was inevitable, but the majority were suddenly in the midst of exploding forty millimeter shells.

In ones and twos, in fours and fives, the groups of Asiaticans were wiped out—all of those who were unable to seek the shelter of the woods. They fired back, but their miniature rockets, their modest gunfire, was no match for the Rad-tank. And Lan swept the tank up and down the road while, from above, Seryl sprayed the surrounding forest with explosive charges. Those Asiaticans who had lingered to fire at the tank were mercilessly squashed.

IN THE space of five minutes two hundred men perished. The slaughter was sickening to Lan. Yet he was helpless. He had to do it. It was as primitive as the ancient law of the jungle. Kill or be killed. The voice of war inside him commanded and he did his duty.

When it was finally over, Lan heard the girl crying softly.

"Lan," she said, "I've never killed a man before . . ."

He waited, a numbness crushing his heart, until her hysteria quieted down. Then:

"Do your people have patrols?" he asked her.

"Yes," she replied. "I'm sure they know about the Asiaticans by now. If nothing else, they've heard the gunfire."

"If that's so why isn't something being done about the presence of the Asiaticans?"

"I don't know. There must be some reason. Perhaps it's a trap of some kind. We went through the Wars too, you know."

"I'm sorry," he said, "it's just that I don't want to see New Haldon wiped out by a horde like this."

"You won't, Lan," the girl said. "New Haldonites aren't exactly fools."

Lan continued to drive the Rad-tank up the now darkening strip of highway. A searchlight on the front supplied sufficient illumination, and also afforded an excellent opportunity for target practice for the few Asiaticans who were still sniping sporadically. Their explosive bullets did no harm to the invulnerable sides of the Rad-tank, but occasionally, Seryl would evince anxiety as the *spanging* sound came too close.

After a time, Lan turned off the searchlight and proceeded in darkness. The tank made a turn in the road and then Lan brought it to an abrupt stop.

"What's that?" he asked tensely.

The girl peered through the gloom to a half-cleared forested area to one side of the road. Sticking up from the ground were a few squat concrete towers. To one side of the clearing a large metal cone stood. It was barely recognizable, for now it was a shattered mass of steel.

"Those are the air-intakes, the filters, and a guard tow—" her voice broke off in sudden alarm. "Lan!" she cried, "they've blasted the watch tower!"

A DOZEN shapes suddenly rushed across the clearing toward the air intakes. Lan could not see what they were carrying, but it was clear that they were going to flood the air-intakes with something lethal.

He threw the tank into action. Once more he was Rad-Off Thanson, war machine, at his duty station. The staccato bark of the automatic forty-millimeter in Seryl's turret was music to his ears. The figures in front crumpled into shattered bits of pulpy matter as the explosive shells cut them up. Lan threw on the light once more. In its brilliant beam, a horde of racing Asiaticans tore over the ground toward the air-intakes.

Seryl's turret gun coughed a belching stream of death. The Asiaticans caught in the lethal stream died, and the living poured over the corpses until they too joined the dead.

Then it ceased. The dreadful carnage was over. Lan sighed with relief, while the girl above him was white-faced and shaken. Her lips were compressed in a thin line, horror etching her eyes.

A disturbing thought flitted through Lan's mind. Why hadn't the Asiatican's some sort of armor? In numbers as large as theirs surely they should have had sufficient skilled men to keep

a vehicle or two operating . . . The thought had scarcely crossed his mind when he saw it.

It was a low-slung tractor-type, hardly different in appearance than a beetle. No more than four feet high it moved over the ground slowly. Seryl spotted it at the same instant.

"Lan!" she cried, "a Creeper!—They've got a Creeper!"

The little vehicle came on even as the girl poured a rain of fire on it.

Lan headed the Rad-tank straight for it in order to give the girl the best possible opportunity to place her shots against the ground-hugging craft.

Still it came, the hail of shells exploding harmlessly against its armor and merely bathing it in a coruscant sheet of fire. From its front protruded a muzzle, short and squat and deadly in suggestion.

As it fired—in that same instant—Lan saw its plating start to disintegrate under the flaring blasts of Seryl's explosive hail. And at the same time the Rad-tank lurched as the beetle's projectile caught it squarely on the bow.

Lan felt the savage force of the shock and even as he waited for the disintegrating explosion, he knew that the hand of death he had so long eluded was closing around him . . .

HE OPENED his eyes against the wet dewy grass. It felt cool and pleasant to his skin, and it told him he was alive.

As he raised his head he could see the battered, burnt-out hulk that had been the Rad-tank, and near it, the shattered *Creeper*.

Then he felt strong, but gentle arms pulling him to his feet. He staggered

erect, dizziness sweeping over him, and saw strange, but kindly-faced people around him. And then he saw the girl.

"Seryl . . ."

"Lan—Lan! You're all right now! My people pulled us from the burning tank—the Asiaticans are destroyed . . ."

Lan nodded wearily, but felt a great gladness at the sound of the girl's voice.

Then one of the men had stepped up to him. Lan felt a firm hand placed gently on his shoulder.

"Rad-off Thanson, my daughter has told me of you while you were unconscious. But there was no need for that, all of my people thank you for what you have done to help us. I know not of your plans, but our community of New Haldon is open to you . . . we hope you will stay."

The man's voice faded away and then Lan felt soft arms around him. He looked into the shining eyes of the girl.

"Did you hear that, Lan? You have a home now."

Home! The word rolled through Lan's mind. He looked up at the shattered hulk of his Rad-tank. It had been his home for so long. A home where death waited, where he had always met it with screaming shells. He had traveled through a wretched world in that home . . .

He saw the smiling faces around him. Then he looked down into the girl's eyes. He saw there all the hope and promise he had dreamed of finding all his life. He saw a new life waiting there, a life he could help build instead of destroy. He saw hope there, hope for a war-shattered world.

"I will stay, Seryl," he said softly.

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I TAKE THIS



EARTHMAN

The Lileens could assume the identity of an Earthman in every respect except one: it seemed they had never known true fear . . .



By Charles V. De Vet

WITHIN the womb the fetus stirred uneasily. It did not realize that it thought: Its associations were too few. It knew only darkness, hunger, satisfaction of that hunger, and sleep.

Having never seen light, it did not realize that it did not see. Hunger it recognized as a want, sometimes a pain. It did not know what caused the pain or why it went away.

The body of the female was its warmth, its blanket, that often changed positions and sometimes moved. Now for the first time it understood that this blanket contained life. It was no longer alone, the only creature in its universe.

Weeks before it had felt strength come into its hitherto helpless limbs. Dully it wondered why. It had no need for the strength.

Now the flesh walls of its blanket contracted and lengthened. From somewhere came a new sensation—sound. Sound that rose to a high, shrill peak of agony.

For hours it was tossed about by the contortions of the suffering female. Abruptly now it was fighting a sharp constriction that ran the length of its body and then it was free. It cried once in fear and longing for its lost refuge and after that one time was quiet. Gradually its eyes focused and it saw the creature lying at its side.

"My son," the woman said, as she lifted him in her wasted arms.

For months the doctors had fought the ravages of cancer and to keep life in the woman's body, until the child could be born. The mother fought with them. The life she could not have for much longer she wanted to give to her child. Her blood would flow in its veins. It would live to fulfill the dreams that were now lost to her forever.

When it became apparent that the baby would live and be well, the mother slept—for the first time in two months—but forever!

The woman had not known sleep since the night she had stolen.

Vaguely she had understood what her father said about his, as yet unnamed, stimulant-essence. She knew that he had at last succeeded in isolating it from the alcohol spirits, where it had lain unsuspected for so many years, as had the vitamins in food. It was still an unknown quality, with unlimited possibilities, but practically untried.

Her father's first expectations were that it would cure insanity not caused by physical defects. He had received permission to experiment on two of the hopelessly insane in the State Asylum.

The first had reacted with a mo-

mentary cure. Within two minutes, however, the man returned to his raving. An hour later he died. Brain concussion.

The mind of the second had been unchanged by the stimulant. The reaction came in the form of violent muscular exertion. Even when bound to his bed the insane man continued to twitch and jerk. Until death came every muscle in his body, as though possessing a life of its own, suffered a continuous spasm. Medical verdict: Death by extreme exhaustion.

She knew that she must have the stimulant-essence!

LIKE A suffering animal she had stolen—that she might die and kill the maddening pain with her death. When she found that, though the drug did not kill the pain, it gave her a fierce, hard courage with which to fight the pitiless agony, new hope came. Not hope that she would live; that hope had been blotted out, never to be resurrected; but possible hope that she would be able to bear her child.

The stimulant gave her the extension of life for which she prayed, but exacted its retribution from the tissues of her body. Her metabolism burned quickly and her corporal substance went to feed the greed of its flames.

She won the race with her dying body, and as little Arthur Gabriel was born, the pangs of childbirth changed almost imperceptibly into the last flutterings of death.

When Arthur was three weeks old he could understand the conversation about him, though the muscles of his throat were not sufficiently developed for them to form words of speech. He spoke twenty-seven days later.

Through the early years of his childhood his grandfather kept him from too much contact with the out-

side world. Only he had some understanding of the intellectual capacity this prodigy possessed.

At the age of five his grandfather died and just as suddenly Arthur stopped speaking. The seven-day wonder was over and the world soon forgot.

At irregular intervals it remembered again as some tabloid reporter revived its memory. When the hundredth year had come and gone, it wondered—idly and briefly—how long Gabriel would live. And if it was true, as the paper reported, that he had all the appearance of a lad of twenty.

BY THE time Gabriel was one hundred and fifty he had become the subject of much scientific conjecture. What was the secret of his longevity? Was he sane? Just how brilliant was he? Was there any way in which he could be induced to talk; if he could talk?

When he reached two hundred, and no contact of any endurance had ever been established, the attempts were given up as hopeless. By all except a few such as Robert Becklin. Becklin had developed the most successful method of curing dementia praecox and, though the accepted leader in the field, clearly understood how comparatively little was known.

With his friend, Almer Carlson, he sat in the study of the Institute's director, Edward Gallun.

"Have you ever been able to make mental contact with him?" Becklin asked.

"Very infrequently," Gallun answered. "The last time we did, we used the occasion to give him several mental tests. He didn't seem to mind taking them, after we got his interest."

"What were the results of the tests?" asked Carlson.

"Although they were the best tests obtainable, they were too inadequate to measure his intellect."

"How did you get his interest that particular time?" Becklin leaned forward intently.

"That was the occasion of an outbreak of virulent influenza," Gallun replied. "He wrote a prescription and gave it to me. I used it on the patients and it cured them immediately."

"I believe I remember the incident," Becklin said. "Wasn't a report of it written up in the AMA journal about twelve years ago?"

"That's correct," Gallun smiled. "I believe his formula is still standard treatment for the ailment."

"Bob," asked Almer, "what would happen if we used duress, say in the form of steadily increasing pain, to force him to talk?"

"If he has an introverted mind, which we assume that he has," said Becklin, "when the pain became unbearable his mind would seek refuge in a cataleptic stupor and no pain, not even the stab of a needle, would reach him."

"Why not try a more radical treatment," Carlson pressed, "such as electric shock or even prefrontal leucomy?"

"If I might interject a word here," said the Director, "I believe that you are losing sight of the fact that this man is not insane. Perhaps unsane, yes. But no more unbalanced than you or I."

"That is true," said Becklin, picking up a small package from the end-table beside him. "May we see him now, Mr. Gallun? I have small hope of this experiment succeeding, but I'd like to try it, now that I have gone to the trouble of having it made."

The three men walked through a long corridor and into a small room at the end. This room was lined with

books, written in various languages. At a compact mahogany desk sat a white faced, long headed man whose youthful features expressed a calm, impenetrable serenity. He neither turned nor acknowledged their presence as they entered, and they stood silently. What secrets were concealed in that brain? What depths of knowledge had it delved?

After a moment Becklin spoke, "Mr. Gabriel, I know that our presence is immaterial to you and that our actions are probably irrational. But we would appreciate your attention while we talk. Perhaps we can interest you. Will you listen?"

Gabriel continued to gaze out the window.

"Your words are not reaching him," said Gallun.

"Perhaps this will," Becklin replied. "This may seem a bit childish to you, but I have given it quite some consideration and, if I understand anything about his thought processes, it will at least get his attention."

He unwrapped his parcel and revealed a brown mechanical case that looked like a faceless clock. A dull irregular ticking fostered the resemblance. Gabriel's head turned and he gazed down at the instrument.

Suddenly the ticking stopped, and the recording of a voice was heard from within.

"Gabriel," the voice said, "I am a mechanical humpty-dumpty. In exactly one minute I will disintegrate into my five hundred and fifty-five component parts. A skilled clockmaker was able to put me together again in thirteen hours. Can you better that time? If you can, I will have a further message for you when your task is completed."

The voice stopped and the ticking began again. Suddenly one loud tick came from the machine and it flew apart. A small inner spring flung its

components out to a maximum two foot radius.

The suggestion of a tiny, pleased smile quirked Gabriel's lips as he looked up at Becklin. There was interest and a flicker of admiration in the look.

For a moment he surveyed the field of pieces. Then he reached over, picked up one of the parts, picked up another, and began assembling. The completion of the operation required twenty-four minutes and six seconds.

The recorded voice began once more. "Congratulations. You must have finished in the allotted time or I would not be transcribing. I have given you an interesting little problem. Now in fairness, will you speak?"

For a long moment, while the captivated men actually held their breath, Gabriel glanced at the clock-like instrument, then he looked up and spoke.

ON THE lone planet of a red sun, following in the tail of Earth's galaxy through space, the Lileens accepted the fact that they had lost their struggle to remain on their world. Now their ship, built to receive the last few hundred of their race, was more than ample to hold all the survivors. They were ready to depart.

One billion years before, at the height of their culture, they had discovered that each day their world crept infinitesimally closer to their giant sun. The mental resources of their entire race went toward solving their problem of salvation.

For a hundred years they sought to find a method of reorbiting their planet. The impossibility of this, being proven beyond the slightest possibility of doubt, they turned to methods of counteracting the increasing heat that grew so very slight-

ly greater each year.

When all mechanical defenses they needed had been readied, they turned to a newer and more hopeful field of study—themselves. Each generation adapted itself well: Few individuals experienced any discomfort because of the increasing heat. Its growth was too gradual. Nature eliminated the unfit at birth, and it cut down that rate of birth, until only those with the best chance of survival would be born.

Through the millenniums they studied their auto-subjects, aiding, urging, and anticipating nature wherever possible, and changing it from its natural course wherever necessary. The culmination of their transition was reached by such little steps through the generations, that it had been completed and they were working on the next phase of their problem before they even realized that they had succeeded in the first. Theirs was no abrupt discovery like the ancient earth chemists and men of enquiry had dreamed of in their search for the elixir of life.

When they had passed the edges of their first success and had started toward their second goal, they had developed the ability to change their bodies at will: Not only the form of their bodies, but its very molecules and atoms. So gradual and so long had been their assimilation that not even the oldest of them, now for all practical purposes immortal, remembered what form or shape their distant ancestors had been when their quest began.

The second step had taken them a relatively short time. Less than a thousand years after turning to the project of space flight, they had mastered it.

Many of the last survivors had been alive when the project started. So few had been born in the mean-

time that accidental and premeditated death, the only kinds now, more than counterbalanced any gain in their numbers.

They were ready for their flight to a new world, and a new existence. A world where they could stop fighting the forces of their environment and work with it to build up their strain once more.

At the time Gabriel had been born they were finishing their last preparations for flight. The form of a liquid crystal had been decided upon as the ideal form for their Odyssey. Theirs was a fluid organism, instantly adaptable. They set their bodily mechanism to near stasis, to be reactivated when they reached their destination. Their vessel, entirely automatic, rose through the atmosphere of their planet and started its flight—clear out of their star group toward a tiny pinpoint of light that would not be visible to them for decades.

“WHAT DO you wish to know?”
asked Gabriel.

The moment had come and they found themselves unprepared, almost afraid to voice their thoughts.

“So many things, that we hardly know where to begin,” Becklin breathed softly.

“How do you manage to live so long, and stay so young?” Carlson asked eagerly.

“Quite simply explained,” Gabriel said. “I have succeeded in achieving almost perfect control of all my bodily functions, cellular as well as motor. Once that was done, it became very simple to renew infirm and worn out cells wherever and whenever needed.”

“Does that make you immortal?” asked Carlson.

“Immortal covers such a vast concept of time. But, as you mean it, yes.”

“I’d like to go further into that

later, if you don't mind," said Becklin. "Why have you shut yourself off from contact with other men?"

"Before I answer that," Gabriel replied thoughtfully, "I want you to keep in mind that we are discussing myself objectively. You will have to bear with me if I don't measure up to the socially accepted standard of modesty. To adhere to it would hamper my answers.

"In reply to your question. I soon reached the point where I had so few interests in common with other humans that I could best achieve contentment by as complete an isolation as possible."

"But you're as human as we are," said Carlson, "why should your interests differ so radically from ours?"

"The difference is in degree rather than in radius," Gabriel answered. "Imagine yourself living in a world ruled and populated by fellow humans with the intellect of three year old children. How much would you have in common with them?"

"But," Gallun spoke for the first time, "why don't you use your great intellect to aid them, instead of shutting yourself off from the world. Shouldn't you help them, even against their will?"

"If I may use another simile," Gabriel said, "and I'm afraid that I must use them to make myself clear: If you were born a monkey, with the intellect of a human, what would you do to help your fellow monkeys? Would they be happier if you forced or coerced them into living in houses, wearing clothes, perhaps tilling fields and working in factories, when their natural inclinations were to play and assume as little responsibility as possible?"

"Using your simile," began Becklin, carefully searching for the correct phrasing, "despite the fact that you would be a very intelligent monkey,

you would still be a monkey. Do you not feel any kinship with the rest of humanity?"

"Decidedly," answered Gabriel. "Like a mother for her children."

"Then why don't you prevent wars," Becklin continued, "or at least attempt to?"

"Possibly I could prevent wars," Gabriel said. "However, the attaining of that goal would have ramifications which would entirely upset the normal flow of progress. As I explained before, I believe the result would be subdititious."

"I've often wondered," said Gallun, "why you never spoke to anyone, if only to escape boredom."

"I am never bored," Gabriel answered. "The brain is a wonderful organ. To illustrate: I have my mind divided into seven semi-autonomous units, six of them lightly controlled by the seventh unit, which I think of as my ego residence. These seven units carry on separate researches, discuss lines of thought, and have enough interests to keep me occupied and happy indefinitely."

"Do you believe in God?" asked Becklin.

"I AM AS positive that there is a supreme being, which you know of as God, as I am of any fact. I am surer that there is a God than I am that I exist. I have found some slightest hint of evidence that I do not exist, but none whatsoever that there is not a supreme being. To my own satisfaction it is proven logically, mathematically, and in any form the question may be studied."

"Do you understand anything more about God than we do?" asked Gallun.

"Nothing. That may be surprising at first thought," answered Gabriel, "but I believe I can explain it with another simile.

"How much do you think the common black ant, in your back yard, understands about you? Do you think he knows anything about how you live, your sociological make-up, your sex life, or even what form you are? He probably knows of you only as a large object that crushes the grass about him, if he is even aware of you at all.

"This much I understand. God's magnitude is so much infinitely greater, compared to us, than ours is to the ant, that there is no slightest hope of our ever understanding Him. All attempted explanations are futile."

"Do you have no curiosity about what is happening on the outside?" asked Gallun. "The world may be dying for all you would know about it."

"Not at all," Gabriel smiled slightly. "You see, one of my faculties is telepathy."

There was a short, startled silence. "I suspected as much," Becklin murmured.

"I regret to say that our interview must soon close," said Gabriel. "Now if you will permit me, I would like to assume the rôle of prompter as well as expostulator."

"Clever as your little contrivance was, Mr. Becklin, it was merely the incidental reason for my breaking my silence."

"I see by your mental reactions, that you men are intelligent, and conditioned properly to share in a secret which must be shared if we are to save the world."

"My telepathy is sufficiently developed to enable me to read thoughts originating at some distance, if they are powerful enough. Last night at four minutes past two, I intercepted the thoughts of alien beings who had just landed on our planet!"

"My God, man," exclaimed Carlson,

"can you be serious?"

"Not only am I serious," answered Gabriel, "but they have the ability, and the intent, to kill every man on earth. I am not certain of their reason. Mostly their thought patterns were foreign to my mind."

"I believe you," Becklin said, after a moment's thought. "Can we do anything to prevent it?"

"Nothing positive," Gabriel spoke purposefully. "We have only one small chance, as I see it. In approximately five hours they will obtain a specimen of the dominant life on this planet, to study, in order to determine the simplest means of exterminating the race. I must be that specimen!"

GABRIEL walked for five minutes along the mountain road before he came to the party waiting for him. He had known their exact whereabouts and even their thoughts as he walked.

They had known of his movements also, but only because of the sounds made by his progress. On the scale weighing his chances he added that fact.

Tenseness galvanized his intricate nervous system as he came in sight of the five very ordinary men standing in the middle of the road, waiting for him. He focused the various sections of his mind in tune with the ultra-mundane aliens. Suddenly a pang of alarm smote his consciousness. They, too, could read minds and were reading his as he walked toward them. Quickly he locked a wall of will about the seventh portion of his mind. If he had not underestimated them, they would not be aware that it even existed.

He experienced a warm thrill of satisfaction when he perceived that at last he was meeting his intellectual equals. His next sensation was one of fear. Would they prove too formidable opponents in the coming battle of

intellect? Would he survive it?

He was surprised to see that they readily accepted the fact that he could read their minds: They would have been unprepared if he had not been able to do so. So long had this been their means of communication, and so universal among themselves, that his ability was accepted as natural.

At first glance they had all the appearance of common enough earthmen, though he was aware of something odd about them. Finally he determined what the oddness was. They were not only dressed exactly alike, but their very features were identical.

Some feeling of outlandishness still persisted until he discerned that not only were they identical but were exact replicas of himself.

He read in their minds that they had assumed his appearance, because they could take any shape and form they wished. They had adopted this transformation as the simplest means of preventing any alarm on his part. Even their clothes, which matched his to the very wrinkle, were part of their bodies. He knew a moment of uncertainty, of wonder and doubt of himself. Could he cope with such beings as this?

So lightning fast had been these observations and exchanges of ideas that they had occurred on the instant; in the first half step he had taken toward them. From these small fragments of fact his logically reasoning mind with its split second reflexes constructed its picture of these aliens that it needed.

"YOU MAY call me Marie," she said, breathing long and slowly on the white oval of her cigarette. Her red hair was cut short, to expose her beautiful neck, which curved gently into her bare, rounded shoulders and down into the dress line held up by the softly rising breasts.

The name, Marie, and the mannerism of letting the creamy, white smoke billow around in her mouth before she drew it down into her lungs, instantly brought to Gabriel's mind the memory of the nurse he had loved deeply more than a hundred years before. He had appreciated their incompatibility and she had stayed at the Institute three years, never knowing of his affection.

The Liieen, he knew, had assumed the shape and form of the being it read in his mind would be most pleasing to him. It was imperative to them to solicit all the cooperation possible from their captured specimen.

Their studying of him in order to find the best means of eliminating his kind, he saw, was of secondary importance; they had so many ways of doing this. Primarily, their problem was to find all they could about the life of the dominant species of this world. They intended to take that shape when they assumed control. Logically the ruling species was supreme because it was most fitted to its environment. Later they would make changes as they saw fit.

"Am I beautiful, Gabriel?" she asked. Even her voice carried the lilt of Celtic melody which he had loved so well in the original Marie.

"You know that you are everything that is lovely to me." For a moment he forgot that she was anything but the beautiful girl who sat before him. Then a morbid thought touched at his mind. What if she were not at all a female but only a neuter being in the form of a woman? Worse, perhaps her sex was male.

She smiled as she read his thoughts. "Our sex is always that of the form we assume. I am now as much a woman of your earth as though I were born one."

He noted briefly that she spoke rather than projecting her thoughts in the accepted manner of her people.

That was probably done to enable her to synchronize her facial and bodily expressions with her speech. This was necessary if she were to depict the personality which he bore in his mind.

"If one of your companions were to assume the form of a human male, would it be possible for you to conceive a child?"

"As possible as it would be for us to conceive one in any other form. However, child bearing has become almost a biological oddity among us."

"By choice?"

"No. Somewhere along the way we lost the greater part of our fertility. We hope our new environment and the opportunity to rest from our long quest will enable us to regain it."

Gabriel turned to the other person in the room. His mind rejected the form of his friend Becklin, which the being assumed. In fascinated wonder he watched the stranger lose its individual identity of feature. Then slowly it became the replica of Francis Melzarek, famous law giver and Chief Justice of former years.

GABRIEL had not been aware that he had been comparing the quiddity with Melzarek until the transformation.

"If you don't mind," Gabriel spoke to him, "I'll call you Melzarek so that I may have some means of addressing you." He had noted before that none of these people bore names. They were referred to by means of thought pictures.

"Please do," replied the foreign one.

"As we are both aware," said Gabriel, "your purpose is to destroy the people of my race. My intention is to attempt to persuade you not to do so. Am I correct in assuming that if I can convince you, as leader of your people, you can command their obedience to your decision?"

"I am only their leader insofar as I

express the will of my folk. However, if I am convinced logically, and not by any mental trickery which you may possess, there can be no doubt but that the same arguments would be just as logical to them."

"That is clear," said Gabriel. "Let me start by bringing up this question: You are assuming that you have the ability to destroy my species. Are you positive that you can?"

"Our conclusions, as to the stage of cyclical history of your civilizations, which we have drawn; using your architecture, agriculture, and such, as criteria, leave no doubt in our minds of our ability."

"Are you certain that you could so easily destroy men such as myself," Gabriel asked.

"At first that puzzled us. We know now, however, that you are what your biologists name a 'sport.'"

Gabriel saw the futility of further argument along this line. "Do you not have a God to whom you would have to answer for the wanton destruction of billions of lives?"

"The fundamental belief of our race in regard to that question is similar to the philosophy expressed," here Melzarek paused momentarily to swiftly probe Gabriel's memory, "by one of your scholars as 'it is just as easy for the strong to be strong as it is for the weak to be weak.' If the act is bad, as your ethics would call it, then we are still fully justified in committing it because we are too weak to do good. If it is good, we do it because we are strong. Thus we know that we are justified in any act which we feel necessary to perform."

"That is a form of fatalism, a theory which few of our men of wisdom accept. Surely it is beneath beings like yourselves."

"Not at all. Fatalism is a do-nothing philosophy. Every act of ours has its logical consequences, which we do not

accept as fore-ordained. We act only in the manner which we believe will be for the ultimate good of our people, with no inhibiting fear of punishment."

"I am not sure that I am prepared to formulate my arguments against your reasoning," replied Gabriel, "but I am positive that they are wrong, and that given time I can prove it to you. Will you grant me this time?"

"Certainly. Would you care to meet with me again tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow will be fine."

* * *

Somewhere, Gabriel was certain, there was a weakness in the aliens at which he could strike. He knew that the chink in their armor must be found in their logic. They were logical people and could only be dissuaded from their purpose by stronger logic. He pondered all through the night, letting only one part of his intellect slumber at a time. While he was certain that their philosophy was wrong, he did not think that it presented his best avenue of persuasion.

Suddenly he saw, not a complete solution, but the weak spot at which he could strike. He slept, knowing that he would be ready for the interview on the morrow.

"I HAVE BEEN trying to ascertain why I have been feeling pity for you," Gabriel began. "You are a mighty race, and your intellect is magnificent. You are about to massacre my people, yet you are committing a futile crime, the fruits of which you will never reap."

"Will you explain what you mean by that?" Melzarek asked. Marie watched, with almost a hopeful look in her blue, blue eyes.

"You are a dying race," Gabriel replied, "and I know why you are dying. I may even possess the solution."

"Please continue." He had Melza-

rek's complete attention.

"I will attempt to explain by the method which we call Socratic. Do you mind answering the questions I will ask you?"

"Certainly not."

"If you found that one of your people had developed a defect, say through an accident, would you destroy him?"

"If he were a liability to our cause, of course," answered Melzarek. "That has been done many times in the past."

"What if he were your best friend?"

"I see what you mean by 'friend,' Melzarek smiled. "None of us have 'friends,' except that we all help for the common Purpose."

"If the defect developed in yourself, would you destroy yourself or permit yourself to be destroyed?"

"Certainly." Melzarek was frankly puzzled by the questions.

"Would you be afraid to die?"

"Afraid? We have no fear."

"I know you can feel pain," Gabriel said. "If some disease, with which you were unable to cope, struck every member of your race, and you and your children, and your children's children were doomed to suffer great pain all their lives, would you all allow yourselves to be destroyed?"

"All who willed would die."

"If all chose to die, would you not be sad to have your race cease to exist?"

"No."

"Then," Gabriel drove home the thought suddenly, "why did your people bother to save themselves? Why have they spent the resources and the very existence of generations of lives to save their kind?"

Melzarek stopped, nonplussed. That great mind looked in on itself and wondered.

"That is the Purpose," he said.

"Our work. Our reason for existence."

"Is it?" Gabriel pressed on relentlessly. "Are you existing only to exist? Surely you see the absurdity of that?"

"I am existing that others might live." Desperately Melzarek fought Gabriel's thought, as well as the first doubt he had ever known.

"But you do not care if others of you ever live!" Gabriel said.

"What are you trying to tell me?" Melzarek demanded.

"That you have lost instincts which are necessary to the survival of any race."

"Instincts? Would it promote our welfare if we hated, feared, and envied as do your humans?" Melzarek asked.

"Those instincts which you mention are merely extrinsic results of an emotional nature," Gabriel replied. "The basic instincts and impulses are love, instinct of constructiveness, and the joy of living. You no longer retain them."

Desperately Melzarek reached for argument to hold his own in this struggle which he was slowly losing. "Your impulses engender acts which do not have a purpose. The results of the desires which we possess are activated by an estimate of the consequences of our acts. Surely they are superior to impulses?"

"Desire alone has exhausted your vitality and left you, in the end, indifferent to the very purpose which you have been trying to achieve. You, yourself, have admitted it."

"And your conclusion?" Melzarek surrendered.

"In your dim past, your people loved, they were compassionate, and gave their lives that others might have a life to enjoy, and not just for the sterile satisfaction of living. Your race is dying now because their emotions are dead. Your only chance of survival is to revive those emotions which

have become atrophied in your long struggle."

Swiftly the thoughts coursed through that massive intellect. Gabriel saw that, if Melzarek could know the fear of frustration, he would have known it now. He watched the inevitable acceptance of his logic.

"You said that you have a possible solution?" Melzarek asked wearily.

"You need a reintegration of these emotions to make your growth full and vigorous once again," said Gabriel. "I possess these emotions. Perhaps I can revive them for you, in exchange for the lives of mankind."

"I'm afraid that I see the difficulties of that solution much more clearly than you can," answered Melzarek. "Though I hope you will try. We intend to depopulate your earth one week from today. If you can give me proof of the emanation of one emotion in any member of the Lileens, before that time, we will leave the earth and indenizen another planet."

"Good luck, Gabriel," Marie pressed a warm little hand into his.

STRONG though his purpose, none knew better than Gabriel the difficulty of his task. The reproduction of emotions needed generations of breeding. A hundred years would be too short a time and he had but a week. The undertaking would have been hopeless except that he believed he would be able to find a basic emotion in one of the aliens which was not completely vitiated.

He had been given free access to all parts of the space vessel. Eagerly he studied the minds of its occupants, seeking an avenue of hope.

First, he sought out the last alien to bear an unfit child.

"Your lost child was flesh of your flesh, blood of your blood," he addressed the Mother-being. "It's little arms circled your neck, seeking your

protection, and you let them destroy it. Do you not feel remorse?"

"It was incapable of furthering the Purpose," the Mother-being replied, uncomprehending.

"Do you not hate those who destroyed your baby?" Gabriel asked.

"Why should I?" the Mother-being queried. "If they had not, I would have done it myself."

Another alien Gabriel asked, "Do you not feel gratitude to the one who saved your life on Liieen-home?"

"I feel nothing. He did not help me; he helped our race by saving me. I contribute to the Purpose."

Gabriel addressed a third: "You are trying to develop a means of transporting yourself without the aid of a vehicle. Would you like me to aid you?"

"It would further the Purpose," answered the third-being.

"Would you be happy if we succeeded?"

"What is happy?" the third-being asked. "I only know that it would give satisfaction to all of us."

Thus Gabriel tried and thus he failed until the time of the final conference. His strongest hope he kept to the last,

AS HE WALKED into the conference room, Gabriel knew that this was the supreme crisis in the history of his world. He stopped where Marie sat. She looked up but said nothing as he bent down and pressed his lips to her sweet mouth. This was his final tribute and farewell to sentiment, and to his race, if he failed.

"Are you prepared to prove that you can revive our lost emotions?" Melzarek asked.

"I wish to make one last attempt," Gabriel replied.

"Please proceed," Melzarek said.

Gabriel turned to the alien which he had designated in his own mind

as the "weak being." He had been unable to find any definite evidence of a vestige of emotion in any of the Liieens. Therefore he had deliberately picked the one with the least strength of mind.

"Research-being," Gabriel communicated with the weak one, "you contributed many vital items of aid to the Purpose. Never, however, have you ever completed the final step. Others have always finished your work and been named for the work completed. You started as Research-being, and are still only Research-being. Do you not resent never achieving the glory of completion?"

"All my fellows know of the many contributions which I have made. I am content."

"At one time you killed a fellow Liieen," Gabriel pursued.

"Do you never regret that action?" Unobtrusively he drove a thin worm of unrest into the creature's mind, and there built up an abnormal tension.

"He was attempting to thwart the Purpose," Research-being answered.

"You knew that he had suffered a grievous blow the day before you discovered his attempted thwarting of the Purpose. At the time you were undecided whether or not to report him, and perhaps have his defect remedied. But you killed him! With his defect corrected he would have contributed much more to the Purpose. You have often wondered about the justness of your decision. Furthermore he had the right to live!" Gabriel drove his thoughts with an ever increasing virility. He struck next with a thrust of savage intentness. "You did wrong! You are evil! You are damned!"

For an instant the alien hesitated, baffled by the thought and the terrific mind drive which Gabriel struck. None of the other Liieens interfered in any way.

"I have doubt no longer," he an-

answered. "I may have erred, but it is as easy for the strong to be strong, as it is for the weak to be weak."

"Is it?" Relentlessly Gabriel pounded at the Lileen's weakness of will. "That philosophy is the rock to which you cling. If it is disproved, your life will be empty. Nay, you will be a wanton thing, a hideous sight in the eyes of your very people."

"Our philosophy is true; it has been proven and accepted by my fellows. I am only following the truth that has been shown to me."

"But it was you who made the decision to accept it," Gabriel pursued. "If you did not hide behind a blind philosophy, which you yourself doubt, you would admit that you killed your compatriot not because you were weak but because that way offered less risk to yourself. You are selfish, unjust. Your sin must be atoned!"

"Yes, I was unjust," the creature quavered. "But my very unjustness is a weakness for which I cannot be blamed."

GABRIEL saw that though the alien wavered, he still held grimly to his philosophical peg. With a sickening feeling of futility, the knowledge crystallized that, though the philosophy was not true, it was valid, and could never be disproven by logic. Desperately he struck with his last weapon.

"You still cling to your conviction," said Gabriel. "Because you expect to live, perhaps for eternity. But if you were to die? Now! Would you be certain that your life would stand the accounting you must give? Look at me, and see what I am going to do."

"Don't!" The creature had seen in Gabriel's mind the terrific force necessary to end his life; and the certainty of death.

"Your philosophy is false. You are going to die!" Gabriel drove home a powerful jolt of devitalizing energy.

"You are afraid!"

He watched as Research-being fought the prostrating force that punished him and the agony within. It grasped at its philosophy, doubted it, and floundered—alone. All inner certainties died. In desperate anticipation it swayed on the black verge of chaos. Another instant and devastating fear would come.

Now was the moment.

"You must meet your God, and be punished!" Gabriel screamed the mental cry at that lacerated intellect.

But the flaming pain paused, subsided, and was gone.

"You are wrong," the creature said in a voice-thought of vast relief. "Because I am God."

And Gabriel knew that he had lost his battle. Research-being had another rock of conviction to cling to; one from which he could never be shaken.

Gabriel bowed his head in defeat. He had tried and lost. Earth was doomed.

"Have you anything more to say?" Melzarek asked softly.

"Nothing," Gabriel answered listlessly, weak from reaction.

"Wait!" It was Marie, and a vast stillness came as she spoke. "Can't we spare Gabriel's life? One human left alive can never defeat the Purpose."

"Why?" Melzarek.

"I do not know why," she answered. "I just want him to live."

As the solid silence held, she pondered. Then slowly her face lifted, and she smiled. A smile of dawning wonder and joy. *I want him to live because I love him.*

The Liiens stood for a brief moment, in solemn awe. Then, as one, the great intellects joined in common purpose. The giant space vessel rose noiselessly up through the envelope of atmosphere and shot out toward a distant galaxy.

...and Gabriel went with them.

The FORM of



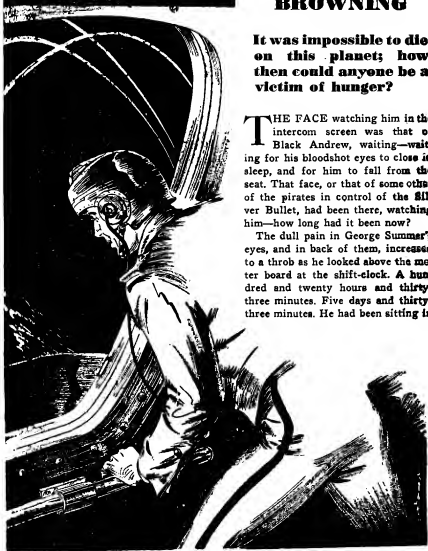
HUNGER

By
**CRAIG
BROWNING**

It was impossible to die on this planet; how then could anyone be a victim of hunger?

THE FACE watching him in the intercom screen was that of Black Andrew, waiting—waiting for his bloodshot eyes to close in sleep, and for him to fall from the seat. That face, or that of some other of the pirates in control of the Silver Bullet, had been there, watching him—how long had it been now?

The dull pain in George Summer's eyes, and in back of them, increased to a throb as he looked above the meter board at the shift-clock. A hundred and twenty hours and thirty-three minutes. Five days and thirty-three minutes. He had been sitting in



the seat that long without lifting his weight.

Just outside the welded-closed door were murderers with cutting torches ready, waiting for that instant when he took his weight off the seat and the shut-off relay tripped.

George Summers chuckled. It was a rasping, throat tearing rattle of a chuckle that didn't help the throb in his skull. After a hundred and twenty hours without moving, it would be an utter impossibility for him to leave the seat without falling off.

The meter for number five rocket fluctuated a little. Automatically George's fingers did the necessary things to the remote control keys to sooth the meter needle.

The hoarse croak of a chuckle rose from his throat again. It would be so easy, he knew, to let the fluctuation grow. In less than twenty seconds the reinforced harmonic in the fission chamber would set off its entire fuel block, and—the surface of the sun would be like springtime back home in the Rockies by comparison.

But he hadn't been perched in the seat five days for that, nor had Black Andrew held back during that time for that.

It was very simple, really. Black Andrew was waiting for him to fall off of the seat. The instant he did, the seat relay would shut off the trigger wire feed. If that happened the safety relay wouldn't disconnect and permit the trigger wire feed to start up again until fission died down below critical. That would take at least two minutes—and in two minutes they would cut through the door and kill him.

What he was doing was very simple, too. He was building up velocity to the point where the ship would leave the solar system for good—besides keeping the six stern tubes going above critical so that he could

destroy the ship before they could cut through the hatch and shoot him. In only four more hours that velocity would be reached.

GEORGE SUMMERS looked at that moment with his mind's eye. What he was going to do would be a daring gamble. Not for him. He was going to have to die anyway and one end was as bad as another. His revenge would be in jeopardy. It would take perhaps a full minute to smash all six of the meters. During that minute it was possible for a re-inforced harmonic to build up in one of the six rockets and destroy the ship—but not probable. Once the meters were smashed he would slip off the seat to the deck and wait for them to cut through the door and kill him—a useless gesture on their part, since they would be condemned to live out their lives in a drifting prison.

That would be revenge for Captain Walters and the crew and the innocent passengers that Black Andrew and his pirates had killed in cold blood. It would be his own revenge for what might have been—with Helen.

George studied the navigation video. The dots that indicated the planets and the sun were run by a complicated mechanism that showed their relative positions accurately, with the sun at 0-0. The arrow on the screen had the location of the ship at its point. The arrow's length indicated the velocity.

The ship was beyond Pluto's orbit now, headed outward. If he were to smash the meters right now it would take the ship over thirty years to return—

George caught himself just in time. He glanced at the six meters, his eyes

rubbing against sore eyelids. It had been nearly three minutes since a harmonic. The chances were a hundred to one that there would be at least one started in any given minute.

George looked into the video and grinned at Black Andrew. Detail was too coarse in the screen to show drops of perspiration, but George knew they were there, on Black Andrew's face.

Thirty years. At least now, if he did fall off the seat he could smash the instruments and be sure that most of the murderers wouldn't live to get back to civilization.

"It's practically in the bag now, Andy," George croaked, grinning at the face in the videoscreen.

He looked up at the navigation screen again. The ship was past Pluto's orbit. Could there be another planet still farther out? Too bad he would never be able to find out. . .

BLACK ANDREW switched his voice to the speaker outside the rocket-control room.

"Cut!" he ordered. "Cut fast. I want that man alive. Cut a hole first so you can shoot if he wakes up. Then cut out the door if you can."

He turned to Niels, his first mate, his black eyes glistening with anticipation.

"If he doesn't live to be tortured for a hundred and twenty-five hours in payment for this," he said, "somebody else will take his place."

"I'd better be turning the ship about for deceleration," Niels said. "And we'd better get somebody in to check on how much is left on the spools. Carty won't be as skilled a dis-control man as that guy is. He could start the ship spinning if one of the spools of trigger wire ran out."

"Hey, Bart," Black Andrew or-

dered. "Get away from that telescope and come over here and take orders from Niels. I've got to concentrate on that guy in the dis-control room."

Bart took his eyes from the telescope.

"There's a planet out there," he said. "About seventy million miles from here."

"What!" Black Andrew said. "Here. Come over and keep your eyes on that guy."

He went over and looked through the telescope. Bart was right. He saw a half-lit disc filling two thirds of the view. The automatic tracker was triangulating it from one position to the next in the ship's line of travel. At the edge of the image through the eyepiece was the distance to the planet and it was seventy million miles!

With a grunt of wonder he went over to the master teletype and typed out a request for information about the object. The robot computer, deep in the heart of the ship, gathering its data from every part of the ship, gave its answer.

Diameter of object, 12,000 m. Distance from sun, 320 billions m. Location—n.c..

Black Andrew glanced up at the navigation videoscreen. A new dot had appeared there showing the location of the unknown planet.

"What a honey of a ship!" Black Andrew said. "It was worth the risk of going to the Earth and shipping out as passengers on it."

"Yeah," Niels agreed. "And with all them spools of U305 trigger wire in the hold we can keep going forever. We're all set now."

"Maybe that planet would be a good base," Black Andrew said thoughtfully. "Twelve thousand miles. No sharp features. That means atmosphere and a cloud layer.

Internal heat. Maybe surface gravity like that on Earth."

He typed out a request for flight data.

THE SPACE ship dipped suddenly below the cloud layer. Below was nothing but darkness through the ports, but the radar screen brought a scene of primitive swamp land extending from horizon to horizon. The analyzers said that the atmosphere was three percent ammonia.

"Looks bad," Niels said. "Think it'll be that way all over?"

"Make a great circle," Black Andrew ordered absently. "There's got to be high land somewhere."

He dialed the audivid intercom. A bed sprang into the screen. George Summers lay on it, his eyes closed.

"Damn," Black Andrew swore. "Maybe I won't get my revenge. Maybe he'll die and cheat me out of it."

He left the connection on and turned his attention back to the radar screen. Shortly an intensely bright cigar shaped object appeared on the screen. Its brightness indicated metal.

It rested on a dry plateau several miles across. An island of dry land in the monotonous swamp-land. Black Andrew's finger went swiftly to the flare firing button. As the metallic object came directly under the ship he pushed it three times.

"Circle back so we can take a look, Niels," he said. "That's a space ship or I'm Sarah Ratour."

It took a half hour to get the eighty-five thousand ton mass of the ship circled and headed back, the fifteen hundred mile an hour velocity killed to a mere five hundred and fifty cruising speed. The three flares

acted as a beacon.

Black Andrew shot out three more as they passed over the second time. The scene below was brightly lit, clearly visible through now unshielded pilot portholes.

Below was a ship of some sort—perhaps a space ship, but once again as large as anything ever built on Earth. It was partly buried in drifting sand. The rest of it was dull and unpolished, indicating unknown years that it must have rested where it was in order for its shell to dull so completely.

"We'll land," Black Andrew ordered quietly. "If that's a ship from some other civilization we may find secrets aboard that will give us greater power than any of us have ever dreamed of."

Niels brought the cross hairs of the stereoptican landing pilot together on a spot close beside the ancient wreck below. The central calculator directed the details of landing the huge ship without a jar—a task no human crew could have performed.

"Here we are, Andrew," he said quietly.

George Summers jerked his head up to look at the meters. His eyes encountered the length of his body stretched out in bed. Realization of what had happened flooded his mind.

It was replaced by wonder that he was still alive. He quickly surveyed his surroundings. He was in one of the compartments of the ship's hospital. The intercom videoscreen was alive. In it he saw the navigation chart across the pilot compartment with its new white dot, the arrow denoting the ship touching it. He saw Black Andrew and two of his men, their backs to him. More than that the screen did not show.

The lack of sound and the lack of a feeling of flight indicated that the huge ship had landed somewhere.

That somewhere, from the navigation chart, must be a planet!

A section of George's mind still puzzled over the miracle of him still being alive, and came up with the answer that Black Andrew meant to torture him to satisfy his desire for revenge.

A BITTER sense of defeat surged up in his mind. But a faint, desperate hope, unfed but undying, lingered. So long as he lived, George reasoned, something might come up that would still give him a chance to bring justice to these pirates.

For a hundred and twenty hours he had fought, with the conviction that he would surely die in the end. That conviction was still with him. It brought an immunity against the fear of death. Even a coward can eventually become inured to the thought of death after anticipating it continually for that long, and George had never been a coward.

It was obvious that Black Andrew and his crew would be too engrossed in the new planet to bother with him for a while. George felt a sense of relief—a surge of hope.

The short, bleached leaves of the itcl plants lost their flat-white color and became a glistening leprous white, the change starting at the base where thick stem rose from half decayed vegetation that formed the greater part of the top soil.

Where the leaves became wet they quickly became transparent, then began to dissolve rapidly. Often they dissolved at the base, the upper portion falling off to the ground untouched.

The patch of wetness moved slowly through the itcl patch, holding together, deliberate in its motion. In its wake was a foot wide strip bare of vegetation.

There were other, similar strips

over the ten thousand acre flat expanse of itcl grass. Some of them were lengthening. Some were not. Some were beginning to take on the flat white color once more as new itcl leaves sprouted on the old roots, for the roots had not been touched.

Overhead the dull grey ceiling of the sky remained as always, unmoving, monotonously undifferentiated. For a hundred thousand years there had been nothing to disturb the monotony of that uniformly grey ceiling that hung ten thousand feet above every part of the entire planet of Andron.

Into this unchanging, and inductively unchangeable scene, without previous warning of any kind, burst three intensely brilliant centers of light, hovering half way between the flat expanse of itcl and the equally flat ceiling of grey.

The untouched itcl leaves reflected back the intense light as a soft, uniform white. Where the slowly devouring wet areas lay, the light reflected with a glistening sheen, or passed through.

The wetness retreated hastily below ground as though alarmed. And from above came a giant roaring sound that seemed to originate directly above and retreat in two directions at once, in strangely confusing echo.

And where the wetness had been slowly advancing and devouring, to sink into the ground quickly when the first bright rays from the three centers of light touched it, now a slender tube of transparency poked cautiously out of the itcl roots, its end rounded like a lense—or an eye.

In a thousand places on the itcl field a thousand similar eyes watched the three centers of brilliance, unwinking. Nor did they shrink back when three more centers of brilliance sprang into existence as the huge thing passed overhead with a thunder-

ous roar.

But when the huge thing banked to return, every eye vanished, and in the unlit depths below the itcl plants, strangely sentient masses of wetness slid swiftly downward, disturbing not so much as a particle of the soil and decayed vegetation that passed through them in their journey.

When the robot-triggered blasts cushioning the landing of the thing blasted acres of itcl and sent searing energy dozens of feet downward, not a spot of wetness was within range to feel it.

"SO YOUR name is George Summers, eh," Black Andrew drawled. "Well, you've seen your last summer. We're going to use you as a guinea pig right now. Later—" He chuckled and turned away.

"Wherever we go you go first," Niels explained. "Now, down the ladder." He gave George's space suit a shove toward the opening in the ship's shell. The two pirates and four of their crew were in the large airlock.

George saw the weird landscape of the strange world for the first time. His eyes widened in surprise as they took in the unnatural white vegetation, and the brooding ceiling of grey. There should have been only the frost of frozen atmosphere, sharp uneroded crags. This was too far from the heat of the Sun for warmth.

He stepped off the ladder and stood away from it. There was a springiness to the ground. The blades of grass, deathly white, swollen, until they hardly looked like grass, formed a carpet of flat white, uniform except for foot-wide trails here and there where it had disappeared.

"Walk around a bit," a voice up in the airlock ordered. George complied, amused at the caution of these

men who had boarded the ship as passengers in order to kill all on board without warning when they were out in space.

The dark, foot-wide swaths interested George. What had caused them? No mere animal could have eaten the vegetation so completely. One of the trails was partly grown in again.

His eyes were growing used to the sight of the grass. He began to distinguish here and there all stages of uniform growth, as if almost daily—if there was such a thing as day under that gloomy shroud of a sky—some creature mowed its trail of annihilation, gathering its food.

"I'll just tuck that item away for my own use," he decided. "If I'm to get out of this alive it will be by taking advantage of some break in my favor."

Black Andrew, Niels, and the others were coming down the ladder now. They walked across the white meadow until they reached George.

"O.K., Summers," the pirate ordered. "Start walking toward that ship over there."

"What ship?" George asked. His eyes followed the pointing arm of Niels, and for the first time noticed the hill less than three hundred yards away. Its crest was strangely straight, and the curve at either end of its length was too regular. It did look like an outline of a space ship, half covered with white grass that seemed to grow right up to it.

He didn't ask questions. He started walking, his mind trying to puzzle things out. Of course the pirates had been flying in the murky gloom by using the radar screen. On the radar screen if the hill ahead were a space ship it would show brightly white in contrast to the surrounding greys. So the pirates would know that it was a ship. That was quite obvious.

The size of the thing was startling.

It was at least seven or eight hundred feet long! No ship built on Earth had as yet had that length. If this planet were beyond Pluto's orbit it was undiscovered yet. That would mean—

It would mean perhaps that this ship had been built by some unknown civilization—perhaps on the planet itself! That was hardly likely though. If this ship had belonged to a race that lived on this planet they would not have let it remain here to corrode even if it were wrecked beyond repair. They would have salvaged the valuable metals and instruments in it.

GEORGE'S footsteps quickened. A sudden shot made his knees buckle. The thought rose in his mind, "So this is it! They just wanted me to walk ahead so they could shoot me in the back!"

In a few seconds he realized he hadn't been hit. He turned to see what had happened:

"What's the matter with you, Niels," Black Andrew exclaimed. "Are you space-crazy?"

"Naw," Niels answered with exaggerated carelessness. "I saw something like an eye on a transparent stalk rise up out of the grass and look at me. I shot at it because I'd like to get a look at whatever critters live in this god-forsaken place."

"Oh," Black Andrew said, relieved. "Get going, Summers." He pointed his gun suggestively at George to emphasize his order. George turned and started toward the hill again.

The absorbant white carpet of grass sloped upward against the space ship—for spaceship it obviously was as they came up to it.

Black Andrew ordered George to start around it toward the right. Eagerly George obeyed. The springiness of the ground was a constant. There seemed nothing to be afraid of.

There was no break in the side of the ship. George kept one eye on it as he followed its side, and one eye on the whiteness of the grass. Ahead of him and to one side he soon saw something like what Niels had seen. He said nothing, but watched it. He felt it was watching them, whatever it was.

It sank back as George came within a few feet of it. The pirates hadn't noticed it.

George reached the end of the ship. The rocket honey-comb was still intact, though much corroded. He decided the ship operated on the same principle as Earth ships, using U305 in a critical frequency magnetic field to disrupt it into protons, neutrons and Alpha particles which in turn disrupted the fissionable elements in the rocket block in a dampened chain reaction.

He rounded the rocket bank and started down the other side of the ship, the pirates a short distance behind him.

Suddenly a terrified scream tore at the air. George whirled around in time to see one of the pirates sinking into the ground. The others were springing back out of danger.

There was no further scream.

"Must be just a pocket of some kind," Black Andrew said nervously. "Are you all right, Grant?"

There was no answer. The gaping hole that the pirate had dropped into gave back only black silence.

"Go over there and see what it looks like, Summers," Black Andrew ordered, having his gun toward the hole.

George complied cautiously. When he was a few feet away he laid down, sliding forward on the smooth plastic of his space suit.

He reached the edge and looked down.

The space suited figure of the pi-

rate Black Andrew had called Grant lay there, several feet down. It was covered with a transparent pool of something that seemed to move as the heat trails move in heating water—only with a purposiveness about the movements.

George thought fast. He could tell what he saw—or he could follow a strange hunch that formed in his mind. He decided to follow the hunch. Inching backward slowly until he was several feet from the hole he stood up and shook his head.

"Better get some ropes and aluminum planks," he suggested. "I think your man is knocked out. The pocket seems to be wider at the bottom than at the top. It might cave in."

"Go back and get more men and some rope and metal planks, Niels," Black Andrew ordered. "And be sure you follow the path we came by so you don't fall in a pocket too."

George watched the giant Niels leave, his thoughts swirling with vague feelings. What he had seen down there should have alarmed him. Instead he had felt a strong hunch to stall for time. Why?

Was that strangely swirling pool that covered the pirate, Grant, connected with the strange stem ending with something suggestive of an eye that had seemed to watch him?

Black Andrew and the three men with him stayed close together, saying little, their eyes roving. George stayed apart from them, busy with his thoughts.

HALF AN HOUR later Niels returned with half a dozen men carrying aluminum beams and coils of rope. Quickly the beams were telescoped together to form one long one. One of the men straddled it in the center with a coil of rope on his arm. Others took each end and lifted it, carrying it until the man riding

it was directly over the hole.

George watched while the rope was dropped into the hole and the pirate slid down it. In five minutes he climbed up and sat on the beam while he pulled his inert load up beside him. Then the men holding the beam at either end carried it away from the hole until they could lay it down.

"He's still out cold," someone said.

"We've had enough for one day," Black Andrew ordered. "Back to the ship."

He ignored George, seeming to have forgotten him. Or perhaps he was sure George would prefer to stay with them rather than wander out across the leprous field on this unknown planet.

George hung behind, still puzzling over what had happened. The man who had gone down after Grant had certainly not seen any pool of wetness or he would have said something about it. Also Grant's space suit had been perfectly dry when he was pulled up.

George was trying to visualize what he had seen in that hole. He would have sworn that Grant's space suit was partly dissolved away and the wetness had filled his suit, but his suit was intact now.

The pirates were walking rapidly in a closely huddled group. George shrugged off his thoughts and caught up with them. They seemed more afraid than happenings warranted.

Inside the ship again, George expected to be rushed into his room and locked in immediately, but still the pirates seemed to have forgotten him. They were intent on getting the unconscious Grant's space suit off, leaving their own on for the time being.

George wanted to slip away, look for a gun or some means of defending himself—make some plan to gain the upper hand over the pirates.

In his mind a strong hunch grew to stay with the pirates—do nothing to attract their attention. It seemed almost more than a hunch.

They were pulling the space suit off the unconscious pirate now. George's eyes widened in horror. The arms, the legs, the whole body sagged in formless flexibility. The pirate's face was losing its shape.

A man near George fell to the floor unnoticed as every eye stared with fixed fascination at the utterly, monstrosously flaccid figure—for it was horribly obvious that there was not a single bone in his body!

Black Andrew reached out and touched the man's head. Where there should have been solid bone protecting the brain, his finger sunk in easily.

And the stench of strong ammonia was everywhere.

George fought the nausea that gripped his stomach. The pirate, Grant, still lived. He breathed, though his face was shrunken and shapeless and his chest was flattened out like flaccid dough. His arms, legs, and fingers sprawled in multi-jointed curves.

Then abruptly George's mind cleared. Those around him still retched or stood in stunned immobility or lay fainting on the deck. But George was fully alert.

UNNOTICED, he slipped from the room and went toward the stern section. He had no way of knowing whether all the pirates were in the room he had left or not. He didn't care.

It would be impossible for one man to take the ship up alone. There was little chance of his leaving the planet alive. So far as he was concerned there was still no hope of escape.

He reached the control room for the stern rocket tubes where he had

held out for five days before falling asleep. No one was around.

He pulled the rod clamp loose from the welding cable and stopped in front of the bank of six meters that felt the pulse of the rockets when they were in operation.

A voice in his mind screamed for him to smash them. He hesitated. He knew why there were no spare meters aboard. Those meters were carefully balanced to their circuits. Only a specialist could install new meters, and then only with elaborate precautions. If he smashed these six instruments now it would mean that not only would the pirates be doomed to remain on this planet, but his own last hope of escaping would be gone irrevocably.

"While there's life there's hope," he muttered, smiling wryly. He hefted the copper clamp in his plastic glove and brought it forcibly against the first meter. The glass tinkled noisily. The white face and delicate black needle caved in.

Five more times he brought the copper clamp down. The meters were smashed. The only way the ship could fly now would be to bring out equipment and experts found only on the Earth, three hundred billion miles sunward!

He twisted the rod clamp back into its tapered hole in the welding cable. Then he left the control room and returned to the room where the pirates were still huddled together, staring at the pitiable lump of flesh that had once been a man.

It was conscious now—or at least semi-conscious. Its boneless limbs were moving in feeble attempts to rise. The flaccid, skull-less head was contorting in attempts to speak or to lift. Muscles that had no bone anchor to work against were jerking against one another in ineffectual, nightmarish movement.

"Black Andrew!" George said loudly, his voice confident and filled with humorous contempt. It had the effect of the sound of a shot in the room. Every head turned his way.

"You'll never get off this planet now," George calmly informed them. "This is really better than sending you all out into space. I just smashed the rocket control meters. You know what that means. If you start up the rockets you'll turn this ship into an exploding atom bomb before you can get it off the ground!"

He had planned in his mind to laugh at them after making this announcement. He expected them to shoot him at once. He wanted to go down laughing at them.

Instead, he looked at the thing that had been Grant, the pirate, its mouth working like some monstrous creation of a mad imagination, the face sunken down deeply under a bulging lump of brain encased in skin.

Then he shoved his way through the still dazed pirates to the door to the airlock. He didn't look back. With each step he expected and hoped for a shot in the back that would kill him.

At the airlock hatch he looked back. He wondered how these men had ever had the daring to capture a ship and kill the crew and passengers. He wondered how Black Andrew had gained his interplanetary fame as the most feared outlaw of all times.

When he pulled the hatch cover closed he knew he was seeing these men for the last time.

THE FLARES had gone out, leaving the landscape dark and still.

The white dullness of the grass outside the ship seemed self-luminous—identical in color and lighting with the white paint on a luminous dial of a clock.

He had nearly reached the looming blackness that was the mysterious, other-world ship, when he heard a shout behind him. He turned and watched as a figure ran toward him.

"Wait," the figure shouted hoarsely. "Wait!"

George waited. It was impossible to recognize the person in the darkness; but as the man came closer he recognized his voice as that of Black Andrew.

"Look, Summers," Black Andrew said, coming to a stop. "We know you must have figured out some way to get off this planet or you wouldn't have broken the meters and walked out of the ship. What'll you take to get us off?"

"What'll I take?" George echoed. "What've you got?"

He turned away.

"Wait," Black Andrew said, hanging onto his arm. "I've got things hid away. A few millions hid on Mars. A few more on the Earth. Take me with you and I'll draw a map so you can find it all. I don't want any of it. You can have it."

George shrugged off the pirate's hand and walked on toward the black shape ahead.

"Stop!" Black Andrew's voice was harsh, commanding. He was again the pirate chief. George stopped and turned back. The pirate held his gun pointed at him. "All right," he said. "I've given you a chance to make a lot of money by taking me with you. Now I'm through bargaining. You'll agree to take me with you or I'll kill you right here."

"Go ahead," George said. "For God's sake, man. There's no way off this planet. I wish you would shoot me. That would be a much better way to die than like that—thing back there on the ship."

Suddenly Black Andrew dropped from view. A single, terrified scream

followed his disappearance. Sickened, George turned his back on the spot where he had been and walked on toward the ship that was half covered with the faintly luminous grass.

He looked at its outline closely. If it were built like the Earth ships any opening into it must be buried, and about at the spot where Grant had fallen through.

There was another of those queer hunches strong in his mind that if he dropped down into the hole where Grant had been he would find it easy going to such an opening. If it weren't, he would simply be stuck and remain buried until his oxygen gave out or he was made boneless by the mysterious wetness that he had seen covering Grant.

"That same thing is happening to Black Andrew now," he thought, shuddering.

HOW HAD it been done without puncturing the space suit—or had the space suit really been dissolved as it had appeared when he saw it, and in some mysterious way been reformed afterward, before they pulled him up? That strong ammonia smell when they took him out of his space suit indicated that there had been some way for the ammonia filled atmosphere and moisture to get in.

And what about his strong urge to say nothing and delay things? It had taken time to dissolve the bones out of Grant—assuming they had been dissolved out.

And why was he out here now, walking confidently toward this ship from some unknown world, following a hunch that seemed to speak from outside his own thoughts, peremptorily? Why did he feel so sure that if he fell into the hole Grant had fallen into he would find a tun-

nel to an opening into this giant ship?

"I know why," he muttered half aloud. "The human mind refuses to accept death. All this is a subterfuge of my mind to avoid the acceptance of death. Superficially it accepts it and wishes for it. That's why I really hoped Black Andrew would shoot me. But deep in my subconscious I'm building up a fantastic hope that in this ship I will find something to help me escape."

He rounded the stern of the ship and started toward the spot where Grant had fallen in. He could see the place in the half light the faintly luminous expanse of grass torn and trampled, leaving splotches of darkness in the white blanket.

Without hesitation he walked toward the spot of black where he knew the hole was. When he reached it he jumped feet first, trying to miss the sides so that he wouldn't start a cave in that would cover him up.

He landed with enough force to bring him to his knees. Straightening up he felt around in the absolute darkness, his plastic gloved hands brushing against the sides of the pit.

He felt in the direction of the ship. A surge of exultation flowed into him as his hands encountered the sides of a narrow passage leading from the pit. Stepping boldly forward he let his hands guide him—ten feet, twenty feet. Behind him he heard dirt falling in, sealing off his escape.

Something wetly glistening appeared on one wall of the tunnel, and withdrew. Then his helmet thumped against something solid and metallic. He had reached the underside of the ship!

Simultaneously a light flashed into existence ahead of him, coming through what must be an opening into the strange ship.

THERE was freshly broken scale along the edge of the opening, indicating that the hatch had been closed a long time and had just recently been opened. George climbed the short ladder and stepped inside. The ladder pulled in. The hatch cover closed with a suggestion of invincible, controlled force, that gritted scale to a powder, yet brought the cover closed with a gentle touch.

The airlock was large enough for a hundred space suited figures to enter at once. George crossed to another door and opened it. Then he did a double take and examined the door more closely. It was almost standard in design. It was designed for the use of human beings!

Thoughts rushed through his head as he explored the almost familiar passages and rooms of the huge ship. The eeriness of the planet, the strangely bleached grass, the terrible thing that had been done to Grant, and the size of this ship, had led him subconsciously to take it for granted that the beings who had built this ship and brought it here must be alien in form—perhaps something unimaginable. But everything seemed built for humans.

The distance from deck to ceiling was about seven and a half feet. Details of construction were seemingly standard. Welded joints were conventional. Rivets were standard.

George reached in to one of the pockets of the suit and brought out the air analyzer kit. He spread out the twelve small, chemically treated papers and vial of distilled water. A drop of moisture went on each paper. On each of them the wet spot assumed a color that matched the test color strip along the edge of the paper. The air was normal!

George shut off the air in his suit and took off the helmet with a sigh of relief. He wished he had thought

of testing the air back at the airlock. Then he would have taken his suit off and left it there.

He found that his exploration had led him sternward. He realized suddenly what the reason was. He was searching for the rocket control room to see if its instruments were intact.

Shortly he found it. The lettering on the meters was the only alien thing he had encountered so far. There were fourteen meters on the bank. But now he discovered why the ship had been left here. The trigger wire meters showed zero. The ship had run out of U305, without which it could not move! And besides the usual supply, there was a huge shipment of it on board the Silver Bullet, where the pirates were.

There was an audiovid directly above the meter bank instead of to one side. The screen on it was twice as large as the standard for Earth ships. George flicked a small toggle switch on it.

"Hello!" he said. "Is there anybody on board?"

THERE was no answer. George chuckled, wondering what his reaction would have been if a perfectly normal voice had answered and given the English, "I say, are you there?" or maybe a good old American, "Hi!" He took one last look around and left the small compartment.

He wandered idly, looking into everything he came to. He went from one deck to another. Gradually he became aware of a feeling that he was on the verge of a great discovery of some kind. His footsteps quickened, seemingly guided toward the forward end of the ship.

He thought of a story he had read once of a similar ship—only it was a derelict in space. There had been tiers of majestic supermen in suspended animation, waiting for the

hero to come and wake them up. There had been a beautiful goddess that the hero had fallen in love with. He chuckled and decided he would settle for just the sleeping supermen and be content to go back home to just plain Helen, the most wonderful girl in the Universe!

That was the way life was though, George mused. In stories the hero met the beautiful girl and rescued her from the villain. The pirates were true-to-fiction, but there had been only men on the Silver Bullet—no beautiful, courageous damsel to spell him off while he tried to send the ship into interstellar space, and for him to kill all the pirates for, to wipe the ugly smirks off their faces as they gazed lazily at the fair damsel's beauty.

There wasn't even any hope as there would be in fiction. It was no more possible to get this ship off the ground and into space without a well trained crew than it was the Earth ship. It wouldn't do to work with the pirates and escape the planet. They would kill him as soon as they got into space and then go their way, killing and stealing.

The situation was still hopeless—unless, of course, there actually were sleeping giants in suspended animation, waiting for him to come along with his arms full of spools of U305 to wake them and tell them rescue had finally come.

Chuckling at the absurdity of the mental picture, George dropped down to the next deck, not wondering what had made him decide to do that instead of continuing along on the one he had been on.

The creature that stood there waiting for him was perfectly transparent, ovoid, glistening with the lustre of richly transparent plastic. It rested on the deck, on the other side of a partition of plastic glass that sealed

off the two sections of the compartment.

GEORGE became aware that he was not breathing. He took a deep breath. His eyes left the strange, jewel-like thing and surveyed the rest of the large room. There was an airlock, open to the outside. The light from the room penetrated outside, half lighting glistening wetnesses that moved and shimmered just at the edge of darkness. A thought formed in his mind.

"I'm sorry I cannot speak your language yet," the thought seemed to say. "I can speak audibly, and will learn your language shortly. I have read the minds of you and your companions and become aware of what transpires. With your help we, and you, can escape this planet, Andron, and leave the pirates here to their fate."

"Are you one of the beings who landed this ship here?" George asked.

"Yes," came the answering thought. "We have read in your mind of the U305 wire spools on your ship. We must obtain them, and also much food from your stores on board. Then we can leave here and take you to the Earth."

"But how can I do that?" George asked, thinking of the pirates still on board.

"You are to return to your ship," came the thought voice. "We will put it in the mind of Niels to pretend to play along with you. You will tell the pirates of this ship. They will transfer the U305 and their food stores to this ship. Then we will take care of them."

George shuddered at the memory of how these beings had "taken care of" Grant.

"We are starved for Calcium," came the answer. "But you needn't fear us."

George's eyes sought the darkly moving wetnesses outside the open lock on the other side of the plastex barrier that divided the room, keeping the ammonia tainted Andron air away from him. Andron!

"You called this planet Andron," George said. "Is that its name?"

"That's what we christened it when we landed long ago," came the answering thought.

"Long ago?" George echoed aloud. "How long ago? Are you the original passengers on this ship or their descendants?"

"Many thousands of years ago," the answer came. "We are the originals. Death is impossible on Andron. The same forces that feed the internal fires send out the Life force that prevents protoplasm from dying."

George turned and left the room. He retraced his steps to the airlock by which he had come into the ship. Fitting his helmet back on he went through the airlock. The tunnel was gone. There was now a narrow cut through the Andronian soil leading up to the surface.

He rounded the ancient ship, walking with bold confidence. He wondered briefly why he felt such implicit trust in such alien things that were able to do such horrible things to a man. He wondered if perhaps he weren't hypnotized, and losing something far worse than the pirates or the Solar System.

Somehow he couldn't believe that. These transparent beings were too far advanced to be inimical—and they were starved for Calcium.

He reached the foot of the ladder leading up into the airlock of the Silver Bullet...

THE METER for number five rocket fluctuated a little. Automatically George Summer's hand did the necessary things to the remote

control keys to sooth the meter needle.

He started to hum to himself. The memory of the pirates, roped together for safety, falling altogether into a pit on their last trip back to the Silver Bullet and the memory of their last, terror-filled scream, would be something he would never forget. He started to hum again, forcing the unpleasant memory away.

Everything had worked just as the strange being had said it would. Niels had welcomed him with open arms on his return and been overjoyed at the news that he had found an entrance to the other ship. The pirates had seemed almost too eager to transfer the spools of U305 wire and the stores of food from the Silver Bullet to the other ship.

They had made trip after trip, tied together so that if one fell into a hole the others could get him out quickly. The alien things had not been in evidence. The pirates had explored the huge ship from one end to the other and satisfied themselves it would navigate.

The last trip back to the Silver Bullet had been to seal it up so that they could return later with the technicians and instruments to repair the meters—and to carry out the still breathing, pitiable thing that had been Grant and dump him unceremoniously on the leprous carpet of grass.

Weak mouthing sounds had come from Grant. The pirates had jeered at him and turned toward the huge ship, ready to complete their last journey to it.

He had been several yards ahead of them, too disgusted with their behavior toward what had once been Grant to pause and wait for them.

He had heard their concerted scream and turned to see them vanish into the ground. He had boarded the

ship alone and closed the airlock. Then he had gone to the rocket control room and operated the remote control mechanisms that loaded the U305 spools and threaded them into their feed mechanism.

He had watched the meter needles creep up to the mark on each dial that indicated minimum fire potential in the rocket tubes. Shortly after that the ship had blasted free of the dirt that had piled up around it and lifted into the atmosphere.

Soon now the ship would be in a free flight trajectory that would carry it without further attention to within a short distance of the Earth. Then he would be able to leave his post and start learning more about the protoplasmic things that were guiding their ship toward Earth.

"Thank God the pirates won't live long in that ammonia tainted atmosphere," he thought. "They will be out of their misery—probably are already. Even though they killed everyone on the Silver Bullet I wouldn't want them to suffer long."

Something that the strange thing had "said" to him rose in his mind. "Death is impossible on Andron."

"Oh my God!" George exclaimed aloud in horror. "They'll be that way forever if that's true!"

"Quite correct, George," a voice

came out of the audiovid speaker. The screen was blank. "You may shut off the rockets and come forward to meet us now. Be prepared for a shock. We have changed."

"Changed?" George echoed. Grim lines settled into his face.

"So now they are in space they no longer really need me," he thought. "And they're hungry for Calcium."

His eyes searched frantically for a welding outlet. There wasn't one. There was no loose object that could be used for a hammer to smash the meters. There would be nothing this time except to let the next harmonic build up and turn the ship into an atomic furnace.

"I think I would prefer to see you over the audiovid first," he said.

The screen came to life. In it George could see a pilot room very similar to the one on the Silver Bullet. It seemed empty. Then slowly something moved into the screen.

George looked, full realization and horror sickening him to the core. He knew now the real fate of the pirates left on Andron, with no food except bleached grass. Immortal, unable to die, on a planet devoid of Calcium.

The thing in the video screen—the thing that he had seen once before as a blob of wetness, intelligent, sentient—was now a man.

ON SALE NOW IN APRIL THRILLING S F RIDER IN THE SKY, BY RAYMOND F. JONES, THE MIRROR, BY ALAN E. NOURSE, NOW IS FOREVER, BY DOBBIN THORPE, THE OTHER INHABITANT, BY EDWARD W. LUDWIG, NO END OF TIME, BY PHYLLIS GOTLIEB, THE PIROKIN EFFECT, BY LARRY EISENBERG, and WHERE IS EVERYBODY?, BY BEN BOVA.

LUNAR HOLIDAY

By
PETER WORTH

Larkin was tired of being chased all over the system — so he decided to take a rest — with the law!

THE TWO men who strolled along Grand Boulevard in the heart of Luna City drew many amused glances from passersby. Not even in the year 2092 did the inhabitants of the Moon's largest and most sophisticated metropolis cease to be entertained at sight of visiting quillipod planters. And the two men were very obviously just that. Their rough frontiersmen's garments and awed faces literally shrieked "hick."

Appearances can be deceiving, however. And so it is doubtful who were the most amused—Skye Larkin and Jupe Holt, or those individuals of Luna City who stared at them.

Skye Larkin chuckled—that rich bubbling chuckle so typical of him. "This, Jupe, is what I meant by my 'Purloined Letter' idea."

"I still don't get it, Chief," Jupe Holt protested.

Skye Larkin sighed. "Really, Jupe, there are times when I wish you had read the Classics. The explanation is





simply that an object hidden in plain sight is least likely to be discovered."

"I get it now, Chief," Jupe Holt said. He grinned. "You mean the Interplanetary Rangers won't find us here in Luna City, because they don't expect us to be walking around, dressed as quili-pod planters."

"That's it exactly, Jupe." Skye Larkin glanced down at the clothing which covered his long, lean frame, and the laughter-lights twinkled brightly in his grey eyes. "If Porky Welton could only see me now!"

It is certain that Inspector Gregory Welton of the Interplanetary Rangers—dubbed "Porky" by the impish Skye Larkin—would have been very much interested. To the extent, no doubt, of using every means, fair or foul, of accomplishing Skye Larkin's capture. The enmity between the two men was not the ordinary one, based on the different aims and viewpoints of outlaw and lawman, but was a much more personal thing. It was a deadly, never-ending game of wits, which on Skye Larkin's side was played mischievously and gayly and on Inspector Gregory Welton's grimly and determinedly.

But for all the small-boy spontaneity with which Skye Larkin played the game, he did not commit the often fatal mistake of underestimating his opponent. He knew the rules and penalties, and he obeyed them well. Which explained why he was still at large in spite of the best Inspector Gregory Welton could do to prevent it. And which explained why Skye Larkin—whom men from Mercury to Saturn knew as Captain Skylark, or simply as the Skylark—had become something of a legend among lawful and lawless alike.

"My feet are killing me, Chief," Jupe Holt complained, "I'm not used to all this walking around. What do you say we do something else to pass

the time?" Jupe's broad face, made pale by chemicals as the face of a quili-pod planter must be, was twisted in a grimace of anguish. Like his namesake, Jupiter, he was a veritable giant. Lank, blond hair topped off his six feet eight inches of height.

LARKIN GLANCED at his wrist chronometer. "It's still early in the afternoon. I don't think a reply will have come in yet to that televideo personal I placed, and the day is too good to waste, just sitting around the hotel. Tell you what, Jupe. The *skul* races are running at Craydon Park. How about a trip over there?"

"Swell. Anything—just so I can sit down for a while."

Larkin grinned. "There's an airtaxi stand a few yards away. Think you can make it that far?"

Jupe looked injured. "Of course," he grunted.

Larkin pressed the signal stud at the airtaxi stand, and then waited for some pilot to appear in response to the summons. Only dimly now was he aware of the curious stares of the people who passed along the boulevard. Mention of the televideo personal had recalled to mind the purpose which had brought him here to Luna City. And thinking of it, The Skylark became grim.

With eyes from which the laughter-lights had faded, Larkin looked along the great, gleaming span of Grand Boulevard, watching the constant stream of rainbow-hued runabouts flash past. On the east side of the span sprawled the great green and gold expanse of Finston Park, while on the west towered the spires of Luna City's downtown section. Soaring over the park or flitting among the multi-colored buildings of the city, were innumerable tiny airtaxia and private jet-planes. The whole was a living tapestry that glittered and

blazed with color, blared and beat with sound.

The illusion which Luna City gave of being an Earthly metropolis was spoiled if one looked too closely. For then could be seen the mighty transpollite shell which enclosed it. The "Dome" as the shell was called, made life possible on the barren, airless surface of the Moon. It held in the atmosphere of the city, and at the same time shut out the deadly radiations and heat of the sun. Entrance and egress were accomplished by a system of great air valves at each of the compass points of the dome. The shell was polarized at regular intervals, and the resultant shutting off of the Sun's rays in their entirety, gave Luna City periods of night and day. Gravity plates, set beneath the city floor and activated constantly by atomic generators, gave a gravitational attraction equal to that of Earth.

Larkin chewed thoughtfully at the plastic stem of his glassite quill pipe—it was an accessory to his costume of rain helmet, hip-high plastolex boots, and bright synthe-wool jacket, properly blackened as the pipe of a genuine quill-pod planter must be—and his grey eyes, even more sober now, followed the great curve of the dome. He knew only too well that the great transpollite shell constituted a perfect trap. Should the air valves be closed by police order, there would be no means of escape from the city. Apprehension, then, under the appallingly thorough fine-combing methods of the Interplanetary Rangers, would be only a matter of time.

But Larkin shrugged; his irrepressible nature would not allow him long to be concerned with thoughts of disaster. To him, this visit to Luna City had the glamor of a holiday excursion, and he did not intend that it should be marred by tension and wor-

ry. Of course, there was that nasty vango business to take care of, but that wasn't the only important thing in the world. Business and pleasure were synonymous with Larkin; he seldom indulged in one without at the same time including the other.

An abrupt, droning sound reached the Skylark's ears; he looked up to see an airtaxi come settling down to the span. He and Jupe climbed in.

"Craydon Park," Larkin told the pilot.

THE AIRTAXI lifted into the heights. Luna City dwindled in size beneath them, became a flat canvas with vivid splotches of color arranged in geometric patterns.

The tiny televideo receiver inside the cab had gone on automatically at their entrance. A newscaster was reporting on the Spotted Sickness, a strange maledy, hitherto unknown, which had swept Earth and Mars.

"...under control on Earth through rigid quarantining. The disease is now sweeping through the Martian cities of Thoron and Larango. Scientists have determined its cause to be that of a mutant virus, though no effective means of combatting it has yet been devised. Spotted Sickness is now known to cause death in only a small number of cases. Its main peculiarity seems to be that of leaving the victim permanently marked with red spots on face and hands—"

Jupe wasn't listening to the televideo. His rugged features were twisted into a grimace of worry.

"Wonder what Fussy and Dino are doing," he muttered.

"Quarreling, no doubt," Larkin responded, with an abrupt grin.

Fuzzy and Dino were the remaining two of the group which comprised the Skylark Quartet. Fuzzy was Koltar Ongh, a monkey-like, extreme-

by hairy, little Martjan of caustic disposition. Dino—short for “Dinosaur,” a spiteful appellation hung upon him by Fuzzy—was Tolog Sath, a scaly, seven-foot Venusian reptile-man. Dino was ordinarily amiable and placid, but in moments of stress he could become as cold and deadly as a cobra.

“Hope those two don’t get into trouble,” Jupe growled. “It’d be the end of us, if we were discovered here in Luna City.”

“I gave them strict orders to stay at the hotel,” Larkin said. “They’ve had enough of Luna City by now, and I’m sure they’ll do just that. Besides, we can expect a reply soon to that televideo personal. Fuzzy and Dino are just as anxious to get this *vango* business finished as we are, and they won’t want to miss a reply if one comes in.”

There was a sudden whirl of color on the screen of the televideo receiver. The excited face of a second newscaster appeared.

“Special flash, folks! Interplanetary Ranger police, by tracing certain credit-pieces just placed in circulation here, have decided that the famous outlaw, Skye Larkin, must be present in Luna City! All air valves have been closed until further notice. No ships will be allowed to enter or leave Luna City without permission from Commissioner Allenby. Inspector Gregory Welton is rushing here to take charge of—.”

Again a whirl of color on the screen; the face of the newscaster abruptly vanished. A canned color music program took his place.

Skye Larkin laughed softly. “The way that newscast was cut off, it wasn’t supposed to have gone through. Allenby and Welton were counting on taking us by surprise—but that’s spoiled now.”

“Hold your hats, boys,” Jupe

muttered bitterly. “Here we go again! Looks like the finish this time, Chief.”

“Maybe,” the Skylark said. His grey eyes glittered with wicked mirth. “Maybe, Jupe. Anyway, it looks like we’re going to have some fun at last.”

Grim fun, perhaps, but fun nevertheless to Larkin. On the one side was Welton and the implacable might of the Interplanetary Rangers. On the other was the *vango* organization which Larkin had sworn to break, men who would kill ruthlessly to keep their evil business intact. Both were warned. Both would be after him. The Skylark sat relaxed in his seat, while the nimble fingers of his mind began to weave.

Larkin and Jupe left the airtaxi at Craydon Park. They did not stay to see the *skal* races, however, but immediately hailed another. This time Larkin gave the pilot directions to take them to Lunar House, the hotel where the Skylark Quartet was staying.

The trip back to the city was made in silence. Jupe was tense, worried. Larkin’s mind was still busy, the light in his eyes coming and going only at long intervals.

IT WAS NOW more than a month, Earth time, that one of the Skylark’s innumerable friendly sources had sent him the tip that a shipment of *vango* was on its way to being smuggled into Luna City. *Vango*, brewed from a certain species of Ganymedian cave mushroom, was a narcotic more deadly and insidious than opium.

Larkin and his men had intercepted the shipment; the smugglers had lamentably perished in the brief though deadly fracas which had taken place. Then, with the cargo of *vango* in his possession, Larkin had come to Luna

City for the annual Reach Week celebration. His purpose was not so much to attend the festivities commemorating man's reaching of the Moon as it was to crush that unknown organization of men in Luna City so inhumanly heartless as to peddle *vango*.

Within the Skylark was an unquenchable flame of altruism; though pursued constantly by the Interplanetary Rangers as an outlaw, his activities were directed always toward the side of good. If he *did* possess himself of a few stray credits here and there, who was to blame him?

Thus Larkin's motives now were both altruistic and monetary. Not only did he intend to destroy the *vango* organization in Luna City, but he planned to make them pay for his trouble at the same time. The televideo personal which he had placed was his means of getting in contact with this organization. He had simply given the name of the destroyed smuggler spaceship and requested that anyone interested in its former cargo get in touch with the manager of Lunar House. The manager—who had been payed well for his services—was then to relay the response to Larkin or one of his men.

The airtaxi swooped to a stop before the ornate entrance of Lunar House. Jupe started to climb from the cab. Larkin grabbed his arm quickly.

"Wait, Jupe!"

"Huh? What's the matter, Chief?"

"Look at those men around the hotel," Larkin commanded.

Jupe looked. He slid back into his seat with a startled grunt. "Plainclothesmen! The Rangers have got the hotel watched, Chief."

"Right," Larkin said softly.

Jupe was tense. "Do you think they know we're there? Maybe they've caught Fuzzy and Dino."

"I don't think so," the Skylark replied. "Welton knows we'd have to

stay at some hotel, and he's most likely having them all watched. As to Fuzzy and Dino, we'll have to find out. If they've been captured—"

The Skylark picked up the speaking tube and gave the pilot instructions to take them to the Emperor Theatre. He and Jupe entered a small bar and grill adjoining the great three-dimensional movie palace. In a televideo booth, Larkin donned the calling mask and signalled the room at Lunar House in which Fuzzy was staying. It was with immense relief that he saw the oval, balded head of the Martian materialize on the screen.

Fuzzy frowned suspiciously at the mask which Larkin was wearing. "Who's this calling?" he demanded.

"It's me, Fuzzy," and Larkin chuckled.

Fuzzy knew that chuckle. Instantly reassured, he became excited. "Chief—"

Larkin shook his head quickly. "Save it. I'm at the Satellite Rest in the Emperor Theatre building. Come here at once, and pass the word to Dino. Don't leave the hotel together; the place is watched."

LARKIN left the booth and joined Jupe who was waving at him. Ten minutes later, Fuzzy entered the place and stood looking about anxiously. Larkin signalled the little Martian to where he was sitting.

"Chief—a guy came in answer to that televideo personal you placed!" Fuzzy began hurriedly.

Larkin became tense. "Where is he?"

"Waiting outside, Chief. I brought him with me. His name is Halleck."

"Good!" Larkin turned quickly to Jupe. "Take one of those tables over there. Watch the guy when Fuzzy brings him in. Then go out and hail an airtaxi. Follow him when he leaves.

Get it?"

Jupe nodded. "Right, Chief." He rose from the table and took another look across the room. Tilting his rain helmet back upon his head, he seemed apparently to go to sleep.

Almost simultaneously, Dino entered the bar and grill. He came forward sheepishly.

"You evergrown lizard!" Fuzzy snapped scathingly. "I got a good mind to turn you upside down and inside out!"

"Aw, but how could I have known the police would trace the money?" Dino protested.

"How could you have known!" Fuzzy seemed about to strangle. "How do you know anything, you big dope? You're so dumb, you'd swallow your foot if you thought it was something to eat."

"I've taken just about enough out of you," Dino growled. "One more word, and I'll peel you like I would a banana!"

"Try it!" Fuzzy raged. "Just you try it. I'd hit you so hard you'd bounce!" And in spite of the fact that Fuzzy's bare five feet of height was dwarfed by Dino's bulk, he looked almost capable of doing just that.

"Tut, tut," Larkin interposed calmly. "What's this all about, boys?"

"Him!" Fuzzy pointed wrathfully at Dino. "That lame-brain has been spending the *Asteroid Queen* money—and now the Rangers know we're in Luna City."

"All right, all right, I admit it," Dino said. "But I'm not the only one that makes mistakes once in a while. What about the time Fuzzy—"

Larkin held up a silencing hand. "We'll discuss this later. Right now we've got business to attend to. Dino, you go sit down at the far end of the bar. Fuzzy, you bring Halleck in."

Halleck was a short though power-

fully-built man with a dark, hard face. His black eyes narrowed when Fuzzy brought him to the table at which Larkin was sitting.

"Captain Skylark, eh?" Halleck said coldly. "I might have guessed it, after that televideo newscast."

Larkin bent his head in a slight nod of acknowledgement. His lips smiled, but his grey eyes were icy. "Captain Skylark at your service, Halleck. Sit down?"

Halleck seated himself cautiously. Something that might have been a vengeful glee shone in his gaze. "Well, you certainly got yourself into something here in Luna City. Looks like the end for you. The place is filthy with Rangers."

"I'll take my chances," Larkin answered quietly. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Jupe rise and stagger in apparent drunkenness from the room.

Halleck abruptly leaned forward on the table. "All right, about that cargo of vango—you've got it with you here in Luna City?"

The Skylark nodded shortly. "Right—and you can have it for a price."

"What did you do with the boys who were bringing it in?"

"They passed away, poor fellows. Too bad—but they really shouldn't have been so stubborn."

Halleck half rose from his seat. "Damn you, Skylark—"

WITH A flowing motion, as smooth as it was sudden, Fuzzy pressed close to Halleck. Against the man's side, hidden from view of the others in the bar, he held a small, wicked blast-gun.

"Easy!" Fuzzy hissed. "Mind your manners, Halleck. Your friends had no business smuggling vango. They got what was coming to them."

Halleck reseated himself sullenly. "All right, you've got the advantage

of me. But I'm not going to forget this."

"Enough of this!" Larkin snapped. "Now look, Halleck, are you interested in getting that cargo of *vango* or aren't you?"

"Of course," Halleck growled. "What's the price you're asking?"

"Twenty-five thousand credits." Larkin said evenly.

"What! Why, that's—"

"Robbery," Larkin broke in. He nodded. "That's just what it is, Halleck. But your superiors will either pay it, or no *vango*."

Halleck's black eyes blazed with rage, but he made no further outburst. When he spoke again, his voice was strangely equable.

"All right, Captain Skylark, it looks like we'll have to pay the money whether we like it or not. Now, about the transfer—"

Larkin held up a detaining hand. "I've already taken care of that. The cargo of *vango* has been placed in a warehouse locker at North Spaceport. I've got the sonic key to the locker. The number is on the key. After you have gotten in contact with your superiors, I will give you the key in exchange for the money. Is that clear?"

Halleck nodded quickly. "About the place of the transfer, how about the Golden Galaxy night-club?"

"It's as good a place as any, I suppose," Larkin responded, with a shrug.

Halleck rose. "See you at the club, then." He left.

"I don't trust that guy," Fuzzy squeaked. "He'll try to trick us, Chief."

"Of course he will," the Skylark agreed calmly. "But to be successful, he'll have to beat us to it."

Dino rejoined them at the table. "What next, Chief?" the huge Venusian wanted to know.

"The first thing to do is to get out of here," Larkin answered. "Halleck may try sending a gang of thugs to get the sonic key. We'll go to our spaceship hanger at the port. It'll be a good place to hide out until tonight."

Larkin stopped at the bar to leave a note for Jupe with the bartender. He added a generous tip, and the man promised to see that Jupe got the note. Then, outside, he hailed an air-taxi.

LARKIN was very quiet as the air-taxi soared on its way to North Spaceport. He rubbed the knuckles of his left hand across the base of his chin, while his grey eyes stared unseeingly before him, a sign to those who knew him that he was lost deep in a maze of scheming thought. There was a slight pucker between his level brows.

The televideo set inside the cab was going full blast. A newscaster had just finished reporting that the Spotted Sickness had broken out in a new section of Mars. The Skylark seemed hardly to have heard him, though the pucker between his brows had grown deeper.

Then a report of an entirely different nature blared from the screen. Suddenly Larkin was alert.

"Flash! From official sources comes the news that Inspector Gregory Welton and several squads of crack Interplanetary Rangers have arrived here in Luna Cty. The veil of secrecy has been lifted, and now all newscasting sources are at liberty to divulge the purpose of this masading of our guardians of the law. Their mission is none other than the apprehension of that famous, happy-go-lucky outlaw, Skye Larkin, who had been traced here through credit-pieces looted from the *Asteroid Queen*.

"It will be remembered that the blame for the pirating of the great passenger spaceliner had been laid to Skye Larkin. A short time later, an anonymous call to the Interplanetary Ranger base in Thoron City directed them to a spaceship in the Redlands Desert some distance away. Here the Rangers found every one of the men aboard unconscious and bound. Nearby were the currency chests from the *Asteroid Queen*. Several of them were empty. Under Psycho-scope examination, later, these men were revealed to be the actual pirates who had looted the *Asteroid Queen*. As to those of the currency chests found empty, the pirates accused Skye Larkin, whom it seems had been mainly instrumental in their capture."

The newscaster coughed and rattled his sheaf of reports. Had anyone looked closely at his face in the television screen, they might have seen the ghost of a grin hovering about his lips.

The newscaster went on, "Traffic through all air valves is being conducted under strictest police regulation. Ships will not be permitted to enter or leave the city without the approval of Commissioner Allenby. Authorities here are confident that Skye Larkin will be caught in the net. Thus, it seems, that the career of the cleverest, most likeable outlaw the System has ever known is to be brought to an abrupt end...."

"And I'm afraid he's right," Fuzzy muttered glumly.

The Skylark chuckled—a rich, bubbling chuckle. He was sitting bolt upright in his seat, tense and vibrant. His grey eyes flashed with a triumphant glee.

"You're wrong, Fuzzy," he laughed. "You're both wrong."

"What do you mean, Chief?" Fuzzy demanded eagerly. "Have you got a

plan to get us out of the city?"

Larkin chuckled again. "Right," he answered. "Listen." And when the airtaxi finally reached North Spaceport, Fuzzy and Dino were chuckling, too.

Larkin found the port strangely quiet. Lacking now was the roar of jet-tubes, the hum of valve machinery, the sharp blasts of all-clear whistles, that he remembered. Instead there was a tense, strained silence. Only occasionally did the great, sliding cradle move through the valve to bring in or send off a spaceship.

Interplanetary Rangers in their green and gold uniforms were seemingly everywhere. Larkin walked some distance ahead of Fuzzy and Dino, so that they would not be identified as a group. But the Rangers apparently found nothing of interest in a quili-pod planter bound, most obviously, for one of the dives at the fringe of the port. Neither were they interested in the quarreling duo consisting of a Martian and a Venusian who moved in the same direction.

LARKIN was the first to reach the hanger in which his tiny though incredibly fast spaceflier had been stored. Here, some minutes later, he was joined by Fuzzy and Dino.

"Jupe should be here soon," the Skylark said, with a glance at his wrist chronometer. "The note I left at the bar directed him to meet us here. In the meantime, we'll begin our preparations."

Larkin produced a small object from one of the pockets of his bright, synthe-wool jacket and handed it to Fuzzy. He said, "This is the sonic key to the locker we rented. Get the vango."

"All of it?" Fuzzy wanted to know. The Skylark shook his head. "Not

all. Leave just enough in the locker to make sure the Rangers will be very interested in our friend, Halleck."

Fuzzy grinned broadly. Clutching the sonic key in one hairy, small fist, he hastened out.

Larkin turned to the Venusian. "As for you, Dino, go to one of the spaceport supply stores and buy one container of white hull paint and another of red. And—oh, yes, Dino, the next thing we'll need is a woman's lipstick."

Dino stared in surprise. "A woman's lipstick?" he echoed wonderingly.

The laughter-lights were bright in the Skylark's eyes. He chuckled. "Yes, Dino—a woman's lipstick."

When Jupe Holt arrived at the banger some twenty minutes later, he found himself gazing at a scene of the most intense and bewildering activity. Paint sprays gripped in their hands, Larkin, Fuzzy, and Dino, were changing the hull of the spaceflier from a bright silver into a pure, gleaming white.

Larkin hastened over to his lieutenant. "You followed Halleck?" he asked eagerly.

Jupe nodded grimly. "Yeah—the rat. Chief, the first thing that Halleck did was to send for a pair of the ugliest mugs I've ever seen. They went back to the bar, and for a moment I thought hell was going to bust loose. But they came out almost immediately, and I knew you had left.

"Halleck was pretty sore about it, I suppose, and trailing him was easy. He went straight to the office of Jandel Gorham, president of Inter-system Exports, in the Universe Building. Then I went back to the bar, and got your note."

"Jandel Gorham," the Skylark said softly. "Who'd have suspected it? His export business is just a blind for vango peddling, of course. Well

that takes care of the last item, Jupe. And now to finish painting the ship" Larkin grinned impishly. "Pretty nice job so far, eh?"

IT WAS NIGHT in Luna City. The mighty transpolite shell had been rendered opaque by polarization, and the metropolis beneath it had become a fairyland of jewel-like lights. Airtaxis and jet-planes flitted like fireflies through the darkness. The lights atop the pedestrian catwalks that linked the towering, multi-colored buildings were loops of glowing gems.

Inside the Golden Galaxy, Luna City's most celebrated night spot, all was gaiety. A Venusian *Panga* band, which at that moment held the spotlight, was drumming out a wild, pulse-stirring jungle rhythm. Skye Larkin and Jupe Holt, seated at a small table in a far corner, watched the writhing contortions of a chorus of scantily clad girls who were dancing to the music of the band.

Larkin toyed with a small object as he watched the chorus girls. Had anyone looked closely, they might have identified it as a woman's lipstick. Occasionally the Skylark glanced at his wrist chronometer. He was becoming impatient. He and Jupe had been sitting here for quite a while.

Abruptly Jupe touched the Skylark's arm. "There's Halleck now, Chief!"

And then Larkin saw him. Faultlessly dressed in evening clothes, Halleck was sauntering among the tables, his eyes roving to and fro.

"Stay here, Jupe," Larkin told his giant lieutenant. He rose from the table and walked up to Halleck. The two exchanged curt nods, then moved together toward the bar.

"You brought the sonic key?" Halleck asked, when they were seated.

Larkin nodded. "And the money?"

"Right here," Halleck said. He pro-

duced a flat package from an inner pocket of his evening jacket.

Larkin tore off a corner from the wrappings, and leisurely he counted the denominations. Then, satisfied, he nodded. He handed Halleck the sonic key.

Halleck rose. His black eyes were mocking. "Well, that's that. So long, Skylark."

"The same to you," Larkin said lightly. But he did not smile. It seemed to him that there had been something ominous about Halleck's farewell.

The Skylark rejoined Jupe at their table. His grey eyes shone like bits of polished steel. Danger was here—gathering about like a storm cloud. He felt it as though it were a tangible emanation. It stimulated him, made him keenly alive and alert.

"You got the money, Chief?" Jupe wanted to know.

Larkin nodded shortly. He was tense, his gaze darting and probing about the night club.

Jupe's broad face was lined with strain. "Do you think it will happen right away, Chief? Won't we have time to get away?"

"I'm afraid not, Jupe. It's going to happen any moment now. Halleck doesn't intend to have us get away with the money. This is a trap—and he must have had it timed perfectly."

The Skylark was correct. Seconds later, there came the pound of approaching feet. A squad of Interplanetary Rangers, resplendent in their green and gold uniforms, burst into the night club. At their head was a short, fat man with a red, round face.

And now the Skylark chuckled. "Our friend, Porky Welton," he murmured. "This is it, Jupe. Do you see the scheme? It's quite clever."

THE SKYLARK took a small object from a pocket of his jack-

et. He tossed it into the air, caught it deftly. "Before coming here to the club, Halleck put in a call to the Rangers, tipped them off that we would be here. After we had been duly caught and incarcerated, Jandel Gorham would accuse me of having stolen the credits which, of course, would have been found upon my person. Thus he would get his money back and I would no longer be a menace. Isn't he going to be surprised, though?" And again the Skylark tossed the small object into the air, and again he caught it deftly. One would have had to have very keen eyes to make out it was a woman's lipstick.

Inspector Gregory Welton had now ascended the night club stage. His men had deployed themselves at strategic positions about the great room. The orchestra had fallen silent. The people at the tables had risen to their feet, and their alarmed voices made a hubbub of sound.

Inspector Welton shouted over the general clamor. "Silence, please!" He waved pudgy arms, and slowly the noise died down. "Ladies and gentlemen, I regret the necessity of having to spoil your evening, but I have just been informed that Skye Larkin is here among you. Accordingly, a thorough search will be made. No one will be allowed to leave until it is over. Now, ladies will gather on one side of the room, men on the other."

There was some confusion at first, but the Rangers were very efficient. A band went among the scattered tables, quietly and quickly carrying out the details of the separation. The others stood watchfully at all points about the room, eyes narrowed, drawn guns at the ready.

Almost it was over. The women had been herded into a line along one wall, men along the other. Then it

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happened.

There was an oath. From among the group of men came a terrified voice.

"My God—it's the Spotted Sickness!"

For a moment there was a heavy silence. The men separated, and now, threshing about in agony on the floor, were two men dressed in the garments of quili-pod planters. But it wasn't the garments of the two men at which everyone was staring. It was the multitude of red spots which covered their faces and hands.

A woman screamed. As though it were a signal, all hell broke loose.

The groups of men and women along the walls broke into a maelstrom of pandemonium. Shouting, screaming, they rushed for the exits, pummeling and trampling others in their haste. It was a kaleidoscope of sound and action. All was noise and confusion. The club was a seething chaos of human bodies—all fighting madly with but one purpose in mind, and that to flee the scene of this latest visit of the Spotted Sickness.

TRAINED, hard troopers that the Interplanetary Rangers were, they were helpless in the face of that savage onslaught of terror-stricken men and women. Caught in the flight like leaves in a wind, they were hurled in all directions. And then the torrent burst from the exits.

The alarm spread like wildfire throughout Luna City. *The Spotted Sickness!* People everywhere caught the contagion of fear. Within a few hours, the metropolis was little better than a madhouse.

Newscasters went hoarse as they feverishly recited their reports. Each passing second, it seemed, brought news of some further violence.

Aside from the furor caused by the frightened populace, however, there were two items of special interest.

escaped from the Interplanetary Ranger net about the Golden Galaxy. The second was that the mysterious *vango* organization in Luna City had at last been destroyed.

This last, strangely enough, had been accomplished by an anonymous tip-off to police headquarters. Directed to a warehouse locker at North Spaceport, the Rangers had apprehended a man named Halleck in the act of removing a cache of *vango* from the locker. Almost simultaneously, a raid upon the office of Jandel Gorham, president of Inter-system Exports, had brought to light a further quantity of the drug. Gorham loudly and vociferously claimed that he had been framed by a Martian and a Venusian who had come to see him upon a business pretext a short time previously. But under psychoscope examination, both Gorham and Halleck were proved to be ring leaders of Luna City's *vango* organization.

Meanwhile, the fear epidemic raged through Luna City. All spaceports were in turmoil. Panic-stricken mobs fought with police in the sand of the landing fields. Crowds besieged each individual liner and freighter, fighting madly for berths. Spaceship captains furiously demanded egress from the valves, declaring in the emergency that police edicts were to be ignored.

Consequently, when a small white spaceflier ambulance with a large red cross on each side of its hull appeared in the cradle of the valve at North Spaceport, no questions were asked. The valve was duly opened, and the spaceflier darted out into the void.

Within that spaceflier Skye Larkin chuckled—a rich, bubbling chuckle. The laughter-lights were bright in his grey eyes as he looked at Jupe, Fuzzy, and Dino.

"Well, that's that, boys," the Sky-lark said.

**Would you like to catch up on your rest
in the warm velvety pouch of a modern
day vampire? Neither did Jerry.**

**By John Russell
Fearn**





FLIGHT OF THE VAMPIRES

THE PROPAGANDA and newspaper screamings attached to the Walters Lunar Expedition—the first determined effort by thirty men to reach the Moon—had no sooner taken on a forlorn note and the rocket ship been given up for lost, when a new and sensational happening was splashed across the front pages.

I'm a stratosphere pilot on the New York-Polar City route; my name's Jerry Dodd, my age thirty-two. I was one of the first to see the announcement. So much for that. Now to that evening edition which a lot of you have seen.

Banner headlines proclaimed: *Vampires Attack London!*

Vampires? Great Scot! Throwbacks to the old days of superstition and half-baked occultism—certainly not in tune with the keen progressive spirit of 1960 science.... Yet, here it was. Outside Stratosphere Headquarters I read the columns quickly, with growing surprise.

Then they had made off, and there followed an assortment of speculations regarding the possibility of the birds, having come from some part of Earth still unexplored. This seemed to me to be most unlikely,

since Earth is charted and mapped from Pole to Equator, and civilizations sprawl right across the planet.

Finally I came to the conclusion that somebody must have been having delusions, and went off to my favorite automat for coffee. I had hardly got started, however, before something close to panic swept the street outside.

The orderly procession of people, in the summer evening light suddenly started dashing for shelter. At the same time there burst on my startled senses the sound of screaming brakes, the hoarse cries of men and women—then an avalanche of people came running in through the doorway with horror stamped on their faces.

I caught at a young fellow as he came dashing past me and forced him to halt.

"What in hell's wrong out there?" I demanded of him.

He was gulping so hard for breath I could hardly tell what he said.

"Vampires! Huge things! Birds—! Killing folks—!"

Releasing him, I fought my way through the people to the door, and somehow got out into the street. It was a staggering sight which met me. The sun had set now, but against the orange flush between the rearing piles of buildings were some thirty enormous birds with a wingspread of perhaps two hundred and fifty feet. They looked like bats and dived with terrifying velocity, wings folded, filling the air with a leathery, beating rustle that somehow had a paralyzing effect on the nerves.

In places, they had come down to the street. Even as I watched, I saw men and women lifted helplessly into the air, to be dropped back with violent force. It was the most ghastly attack I had ever witnessed.

I hurried to the nearest fallen man

and caught at him. He was pretty nearly dead, and in the back of his neck were two deep punctures about an inch across. He moved feebly in my grasp. Then, before he could utter a word, death caught up with him and he relaxed.

But I had had the time to notice that it was rather the shock he had received than actual injury which had killed him. His neck was not broken, nor had he lost overmuch blood. In fact, his only trouble seemed to be a broken ankle from the fall.

THEN ONE of the things dived for me. I had my service raygun in my belt and I fired instantly. The vicious ray lashed the monster across the belly as it swept over to within a few feet of me. To my horrified amazement, the ray glanced off. Either the creature was armor-plated, or else of a constitution impervious to earthly destructive devices.

I took the only way out to save myself—dashed for a doorway. This saved me, for the thing whizzed past once or twice with a dank, moldering odor, and then flew off to join its fellows.

The confusion increased. Corps of militia arrived with their defensive weapons and set about the flying monsters in real earnest. I joined them, since of course I am experienced in campaigning as well as being a civil pilot.

Our efforts, though none too effective, at least harassed the things badly, with the result that they finally flew off—but not until every window around us had been broken and scores of men and women lay dead or dying in the street. Night had fallen now, too, and the scene looked doubly horrible in the pallid glare of arclights.

I straightened up at last, sweating and breathless, watched the final

monster hurtle upwards and vanish. The attack was over.

"For God's sake, what are they?" panted a gunner, beside me. I shook my head. "No idea. But I'll find out soon enough. I'm going to Headquarters to see what they think."

I made my way through the arriving fleet of ambulances, and so back to Stratosphere Headquarters. Within, I found an air of tense activity. Few low-pilots were hurrying about everywhere, most of them in their rarely-worn battle kit, their faces grim. I went through the midst of them into the briefing room.

"What's going on?" I asked the Controlling Officer, as he studied a list of notes anxiously.

"Plenty!" he snapped back. "Those damned birds came from London. It seems they didn't return to London after flying around, but crossed the Atlantic to have a go at us! God knows where they originated. Some remote part of Earth, I suppose."

"Things like those don't belong to Earth," I told him grimly. "Unless I'm dead wrong, they've come from another world!"

He shrugged. "Well, we're taking no chances. A squadron of strato-fighters is taking off in ten minutes to search for them. They can stand raygun charges, but I think the protonic guns will put paid to them quick enough. So far, they seem to have limited themselves to attack—no kidnapping. And there won't be either if we can stop it."

"That means I go up too?" I questioned eagerly, but to my disappointment he shook his head.

"Not yet; you're too valuable on the civil line. You'll stand by for orders. Report back here in an hour."

I had to take it, of course—but it was hard to see the others ready for action and departing from me with

good-luck smiles. Finally, I wandered out of the building; then, struck with a sudden thought, I headed uptown. Might as well reassure myself that Eva was safe, anyway.

The moment I reached her apartment block, though, I saw that something was wrong. Not a window in the place had survived the onslaught of an hour before. I quickened from my leisurely pace and raced up the staircase to her apartment, rapped on the door.

"EVA! OPEN up! It's me—Jerry!"

There was no reply from within; yet I knew Eva Grant must be at home, for her evenings were spent in studying for the Advanced Science Examination she was determined to pass before we were married.

Again I hammered. Then, as I got no answer, I hurtled myself against the door and sent it flying backward on its hinges. There lay Eva on the floor of the living room, shattered glass from the window all around her, blood smearing the back of her neck under her thick dark hair.

Hauling her up in my arms I carried her to a chair. She was alive, thank God, though her pulse was feeble. Bandages and restorative brought consciousness slowly back to her. Color began to creep back into her cheeks.

Weakly she turned her head, then winced at the pain in her neck. She looked at me and smiled faintly.

"Hello... Jerry."

"You were attacked by one of those damned bird things?" I demanded, and as she nodded I hurried into the next room and snatched down a blood-test syringe—a small everyday device used by most of us for determining physical condition.

She started as the needle stabbed

her arm, then I gave a low sigh of relief as my worst fears were banished. Her blood was normal enough: no sign of venom from the thing's jaws.

"Just what happened?" I asked her, as she began to recover.

"I—I hardly remember. I heard the commotion outside so I went to the window to take a look. Then one of the birds came shooting down, smashed the window glass in pieces. I dodged the splinters, thank goodness, but it didn't avail me much. The bird came half into the room, got me by the back of the neck— Well, next thing I remember I saw you."

I clenched my fist. "If only I knew what these birds are! What they're after..."

"I don't think they're of this world, anyway," she said, her voice quiet. "I've studied enough science to know that. I saw the bird at close quarters, and it was covered in a black, non-light-reflecting substance, utterly invulnerable. Nature doesn't provide her creatures with a covering like that without a very good reason—and the only reason I can think of is protection against the cold of space. Just as a fish has extra bones to withstand the pressure of water."

"I guessed myself that they don't belong to Earth," I said. Then I snapped my fingers. "What about the Moon?"

"I wondered about that," she said, musing. "Their size is feasible then, since the Moon's gravity is only a sixth of the Earth's. But why they should so suddenly come to Earth like this I can't imagine. Unless," she finished slowly, "the Walters Lunar Expedition to the Moon *did* succeed after all, and furious at the invasion of their domain these creatures are trying to exact reprisal. Remember, Jerry, there are thirty birds, from all accounts—and thirty men went to

Luna. It sort of ties up, doesn't it?"

IT WAS AS good an idea as any—but it didn't make things any easier. I debated for a moment, but before I could say anything further, there came to our ears through the smashed window that already grimly familiar sound of leathery beating and the whistle of cleaved air.

"They're coming back!" Eva gasped hoarsely, leaping up from her chair, and at the same moment there came a miscellany of screams and shouts from the street below.

But I was not concerned with this: my gaze was directed to the window as bird after bird came hurtling from the heights. As though driven by some inexplicable instinct, one of them dived and twisted abruptly, hurtling straight for the shattered window. It came with such demoniac force it knocked me flying—but at least I had the time to see it.

It certainly resembled the old-time pterodactyl. There was the same evil head, the merciless scar of beak, the beady, heavily filmed eyes, as though for extra strong protection. The wing-spread, huge though it was, was handled with easy grace.

So much I had time to note, then I was struggling with the thing for all I was worth. Firing my useless gun at it, I strove to prevent its settling on the fighting, screaming Eva—but again that steel-hard casing it possessed defeated all my efforts. Right before my eyes Eva was lifted in the thing's jaws and borne swiftly towards the window.

I made one last desperate effort to save her, but a beating wing struck me with such force I went spinning six feet away and crashed half senseless against the wall. By the time I had recovered my balance and wits, Eva had gone, nor could I see any

sign of her by the time I had rushed to the window.

In the street below there was pandemonium as several of the men and women not yet removed from the earlier attack were picked up and carried aloft like children seized by giant eagles. In all there were probably thirty of the monsters once again, and they gathered together almost like plane squadrons, carrying a man or woman each, and heading for the night sky.

By the time I had blundered distractedly downstairs to the street, there were few of them left. The defense guns were rattling again just as futilely as before. I didn't even stop to watch them. At top speed I raced to Stratosphere Headquarters and hurried in to the Controlling Officer.

"I've got to go up and help settle these damned things!" I told him. "They stole my fiancée not two minutes ago and—"

"Hop to it," he ordered briefly. "We want every man we can get right now. We were going to send for you anyway. Squadron K—Action Station Nine."

I nodded and raced out.

WITHIN ten minutes desperation had hurled me into the air with all engines going the limit. I felt that there might be a chance even yet to overtake the flying horrors, since I reckoned that their speed would slow down as they reached the stratosphere, loaded as they were too.

In this I was partly right. As I climbed I saw a group of them against the full moonlight. By this time New York was a mere segment of spotted light infinitely far below me. Instantly I broke from my squadron and went streaking across the sky after them.

They saw me, headed for the greater heights. I was after them immediately, climbing, climbing, with the motors thundering a steady, effortless song. But one thing puzzled me now. These birds no longer carried human beings in their jaws!

Two horrible thoughts flashed upon me. Had they *dropped* their captives, or was this another flock of birds entirely? Well, what did it matter now? Attack them anyway and trust to the rest of the boys to get whatever others there might be.

The moment I got near enough I opened up with my protonic guns. They shied! One actually blew to pieces, and that brought a hard grin of satisfaction to my face. At last I had a weapon they couldn't stand. Sheer energy biting into their filthy bodies was more than they could tolerate, evidently.

The fate of this one, however, warned the others. To my amazement they suddenly folded their wings into their bodies and rose higher and higher with increasing swiftness! How they did it I could not imagine—and it was tragic too from my own point of view. There were definite limits to which my plane could ascend, and to go much higher would mean going beyond the atmosphere altogether.

Then, apparently annoyed by my pursuit, one of them deliberately stalled and waited, poised uncannily in space. I could not slow myself down in time, with the result that I hurtled straight at it. Instinctively, I dove out of my chair, and it was this which saved me, for the creature came smashing through the observation dome amid a shower of splinters.

Instantly, the frightful cold of these great heights surged into my cabin. I would certainly have died, but for the protection of my stratomask and kit. I half knelt by the wall, clawing

at the driving, battering mass of shell-encrusted leather overwhelming me. It mastered me in a few seconds, whirled me about, then tore the helmet from its studs at the back of my neck.

Savage pain went through the length of my body; then I must have fainted. . . .

I RETURNED to consciousness aware of the most inexplicable sensation. Beyond having a stiff neck I was sublimely comfortable! I seemed to be lying in the midst of a feather bed, and every weight and pressure of normal existence had gone from me. I had air, warmth, and ease beyond all parallel. From those last conscious moments of horror to this paradise demanded a good deal of puzzled thinking.

When I had sorted things out, I got the shock of my life. I was lying in a kind of pouch, softly hair-lined, and composed of rubberlike skin. One section of this skin was slightly transparent, and through it I gazed upon the incredible vision of space itself—something I had never seen before.

Stars by the quadrillion; a Sun girdled with prominences; a Moon at the full and already swollen beyond normal dimensions, growing so fast I could see the shadows on the slight right-hand edge of the approaching wane.

As I took this in, incredulously enough, my eyes moved on to a flock of birds, wings tight-pressed to their sides, speeding in straight-line formation through the gulf. I counted thirty-eight of them altogether. On the nearer ones I beheld a bulging pouch after the fashion of a kangaroo.

Now I understood! Their jaws had been empty because the captives had gone into the pouches. I was inside the thing that had attacked me, then. Being carried without harm.

From vague revulsion my emotion changed to wonder at this marvel of Nature defeating the void of space, yet keeping me safe, Air, I discovered, was entering from a natural sac at one end of the pouch and being expelled by the action of a steadily working muscle and natural vent at the other. Surely Nature in all her varied moods had never created so outlandish a creature as this!

But the *reason* for it all? I fingered my neck. Blood had dried there. Why hadn't I been killed? Then it became obvious to me as the Moon increased in size that there was our destination—and at a gigantic speed, too.

THE MORE I studied the birds the more I could see a faint stream of energy being projected from their tails. I think I guessed right in assuming that they utilized the radiations of space as an ordinary bird utilizes air, pushing against its different densities and cleaving through it, given just the right energy wavelength by Nature to expel against it and hurtle them forward. Obviously they could live either in air or out of it: the air I was receiving had evidently been stored somewhere and was now being released for my especial benefit.

And at the end of the journey? That was a grim thought. The more I pondered the more sure I felt that this was an act of vengeance for the desecration of their domain by the Walters Lunar Expedition. If so, then I was resolved to sell my life as dearly as possible. I still had my raygun, anyway. Rather than fall victim to a lot of educated pterodactyls, I'd turn it on myself.

At intervals I slept in curiously drowsy contentment, an effect undoubtedly engendered by my cosy position and lack of restricting gravity. I believe the birds absorbed nourishment from the void somehow, prob-

ably using the very medium against which they thrust, or else they absorbed radiations unimaginable to a flesh and blood Earthman.

And each time I awoke the Moon was larger and had waned further—until finally we were dropping in perfect formation down to its powdery, blinding white surface.

Craters, glaring mountain ranges, dead sea bottoms—all reared up towards us at alarming speed. Trained as I was to maneuvering a plane, it seemed to me that a crash was inevitable—but at the last second, with easy grace, the whole flock swept over the nearest mountains and dove down into the depths of an extinct crater.

The sunlight snuffed out as though it had never been. We were plunging through abysmal, airless shadows into the very depths of the Moon. The darkness was so intense after the glare outside, I was almost blinded.

Then after a while it began to lighten. From somewhere below a deep pinkish light swelled into rosy glow. It lighted towering canyons, the pumicelike escarpments of this honey-combed satellite, until finally we broke free and landed in a vast central area which I judged must be the approximate core of the Moon. And here, unsupported as far as I could tell, blazed a circular red ball illuminating the colossal cavern from end to end. Judging from the soft shadows there was air here, of sorts.

SOMETHING pushed me—muscles I think—and I was “ejected” from the bird’s pouch like a pea popped from a pod. I got to my feet, balancing with some difficulty against the lesser gravitation. Obviously we were not exactly at the Moon’s core, else the gravity would have been equal on all sides and I’d have been in mid-air.

That blazing ball, as far as I could judge, was some sort of radioactive material—possibly even one of the last natural energy minerals left in the Moon. But how it hung there without support I just couldn’t imagine.

Then, as I got over the eye-wrenching dimensions of the cavern and drew comparatively fresh air into my lungs, I looked anxiously round on my fellow-travelers. They too had been ejected—thirty of them—and among them, pale but unharmed, was Eva!

I rushed over to her right away and caught her arm.

“Eva! Thank God you’re safe!”

“Looks as if the guess about the Selenites was right,” she commented after a moment, looking round. “But what the idea is I’ll be hanged if I know.”

Evidently we were soon to find out for, waddling forward in penguin-style on their queer feet, the birds forced us, by no means roughly, to advance along the cavern floor. They did it by prodding us with their beaks, and when we showed reluctance they merely pushed the harder, without resorting to the terrible force they could have used had they wished. This at last seemed a hopeful sign. But back of my mind was the remembrance of the carnage and destruction they had caused back on Earth. Probably we were being led to the slaughter.

We advanced perhaps a mile, and in that time the red ball seemingly so near at hand came no closer to us. I was puzzling over it when Eva seemed to solve the problem.

“It must actually be enormously big and a long distance away, situated at the exact central core of the Moon. Therefore, it needs no support because gravity is pulling equally on all sides.

It's probably the final unburned-out core, and forms a sun of this inner world. I suppose that's the explanation."

WE STOPPED suddenly on the edge of a long, sloping incline. Down at the base of it, three hundred feet perhaps, was the real floor of the Moon's core. More than that: there was a city of sorts. It looked utterly crazy from Earth standards because it was composed of walls without roofs! There wasn't a roof anywhere. But there was a definite impression of order, and everything was built to an obvious plan.

"Why, it's a—a nest-city!" Eva ejaculated, gazing down. "The Selenites must enter their homes through the roof—just as an Earth bird gets into its nest!"

I nodded as we gazed in wonder. The rest of the people gathered doubting and anxious about us. Then I directed my attention to something standing apart from the mass of square, roofless buildings. It was a tapering obelisk with a kind of platform at the top. Upon this, fastened down with massive cables, was a sadly battered and travel-stained rocket ship!

"The Walters Expedition machine!" I cried, pointing to it.

"And no sign of the thirty men who went in it," Eva said, with ominous quietness. "And there are thirty of us here, too! It begins to look pretty bad—"

She couldn't get any further for the Selenites pushed us forward again. We were forced to hurry down the sloping cavern side with them behind us—and the nearer we came to the roofless houses the more we could see how large they really were.

We were driven past most of them, but here and there we did catch

glimpses that showed these weird creatures were anything but limited to a bird's intelligence. There were many baffling machines in some of the buildings, queerly fashioned for ornithic instead of human appendages.

AND SO FINALLY we were seized and lifted over the high wall of one of the largest buildings of all—set gently on our feet. Here I felt horror grip me completely. . . .

The place was pretty well crowded with birdmen of varying sizes. Some were quite small and less like birds than those which had brought us hither, nor had they any sacs, so presumably they were of a different species. More, they had rudimentary forearms supplied with a humanlike hand. Most of them seemed to be busy with a variety of instruments.

But it was not this that horrified me. It was the sight of thirty Earthmen, motionless and deathly white, strapped to thirty immaculately clean tables! Every member of the Walters Lunar Expedition was there, from Commander Walters himself to the lowliest rocket-hand. Strapped down, at the mercy of these abominable things of a near-dead world. . . .

"What—what are they going to do?" Eva whispered, her startled eyes turning to me.

I glanced about me at the drawn faces of the others, then at the impregnable lofty walls. Certainly there was no retreat, for there were no doors. The only chance of escape, and that none too certain, lay in getting over the towering walls around us, but, on this I had little time to speculate, for Eva's horrified gasp snapped me back to studying the scene confronting us.

Others of the Selenite scientists had come into the long operating theater now, pushing rubber-wheeled stretch-

ers before them. And there were thirty of them! Straps were dangling from them in readiness for—? Nothing could have been more significant! They were meant for us!

We all shifted uneasily, but we couldn't move far for the waiting flying Selenites were immediately back of us, prodded us with their beaks if we moved too far. So we were forced to watch the ghastly business.

To each pinioned Expedition man's table there was run alongside a vacant trestled stretcher. Between stretcher and table was placed a machine which bristled cables and pumps. It looked rather like one of those old-time ticker-tape machines.

Once this was done, in all thirty cases, the chief operating surgeon made a signal. One of our party, a man, was seized and forced across the floor, fighting and screaming at the top of his strength. Ultimately, as the rest of us watched in quaking anticipation, he was forced down on the furthest stretcher and strapped into place. Delicate needles in the claw hands of one of the surgeons began to probe the back of his neck as he yelled and screamed.

THIS WAS getting too much! My rising fear began to spill over when one after another of our party was seized and similarly treated. Any moment now it would be the turn of Eva, and then me! But not if I could help it!

I ran my eyes quickly along the wall surrounding us. We had only a sixth of Earth's gravity to defeat. If we could get away in one flying leap we might— Then what? No space ship. Yes, there was one—the one on the pedestal! If only we could get to it, we could perhaps...

I confided my notions to Eva in

whispers as she watched the slowly dwindling line of victims. Finally she nodded and waited for my signal. I gave it when the penultimate one to her was taken and bundled over to a stretcher.

"Now!" I shouted, and then ran and leapt with all my power.

The surprise of my move helped. I never put such strength into a leap before. Up I went, sailing high over the heads of the astonished bird-surgeons until I landed on the broad top of the wall. Not a second behind me came Eva. She would have overshot the mark, being lighter than I, had I not clutched her. With hardly a moment's pause we leapt downwards to the street outside, then proceeded in gargantuan jumps towards that distant obelisk with the space machine atop it.

But we'd reckoned without the demoniac speed of those lunar birds! Inside a minute they were sweeping after us with projectile velocity. We leapt round the back of a building for protection and I snatched out my raygun, determined if we *must* be captured to give a good account of myself first.

So, covering Eva as best I could, I stood there blazing away as rapidly as I could press the button. One of the creatures I *did* damage, for I shot it through one vulnerable spot—the eye. It crashed to the street, twisting and squirming, but this did not deter the others. Again and again my ray glanced off their armor-plated bodies, until at last my gun was empty of charges and I had to throw it away.

In any case, the game was up now. Struggling savagely, we were seized in those mighty jaws, lifted into the air and borne back swiftly to the operating theater. Again it came to me with passing wonder that the

creatures didn't kill us there and then. Had they chosen to close their jaws, they could easily have cut us in half. But they didn't. Instead, they finally deposited us on the two remaining stretchers, held us down by main strength while the straps were buckled into place.

I gave up struggling because I had to. I simply lay breathing hard, my head turned sideways to watch Eva. She was looking terrified, and no wonder. The rest of our party was motionless now, as dead-faced and immobile as the members of the Walters Expedition beside whom they lay.

Finally I glared up at the bird-faced surgeon studying the tickertape machine beside me.

"Look here, you, what's the meaning of all this?" I demanded. "What's the explanation? We're entitled to that, aren't we?"

Not a vestige of expression showed on his weird face. I doubted if he even heard me—and certainly there were no attempts at thought-transference. He simply went on calmly with his task, which consisted of fixing a sort of cradle so that my head was forced forward slightly. It was in no wise uncomfortable, but I was desperately afraid just the same.

Then I felt something stab my neck. Almost immediately my body seemed to float away from me and I lost consciousness of my surroundings....

I DO not know how long I was senseless, but to my surprise I found myself in a quite Earthly-looking bed. The implacable bird-like scientist who had gone to work on me was there too, and in the next bed was Commander Walters himself, the man next to whom I had been lying when I had lost consciousness.

He was sitting up, even smiling slightly. I looked beyond him down an immense ward. Everybody was conscious again, talking to each other, tended by Selenites. Far away, I could see Eva, apparently none the worse.

I turned my eyes back to Walters' bronzed, amused face.

"What the devil's the idea of all this?" I exploded. Then before he could answer me I went on hurriedly: "Look, we've got to think out a way of getting back to Earth. Some hellish sort of experiment is going on! These blood-sucking vultures—"

"Nothing of the sort, man!" Walters contradicted me abruptly. "They're gallant scientists, all of them! The pterodactyl type are probably the bravest warriors of the race. They took an awful chance going to Earth as they did. Their methods must have looked like deliberate attack, I suppose—but that was not true. How many Earthlings died?" he asked me.

"Dozens, I imagine. But it was an attack—!"

"No," he insisted. "It was necessity! Those who died must have succumbed to shock, nothing more. The flying Selenites, fitted by Nature for space flight, are natural chemical agents. Their task was to find people whose blood quota exactly matched that of we thirty men here, of the Expedition."

I stared at him blankly. "You mean," I whispered, "that when they were making their vampirish attacks, plugging people in the neck, they were actually making blood tests?"

"Exactly. Didn't you see for yourself how marvelously their internal organs are constructed? They are living laboratories, and able to carry anything in a special pouch."

I REMEMBERED this part, and it was just commencing to dawn on me why none of us had been really hurt.

"So," Walters resumed, "when they had checked their results, they knew the exact thirty people they wanted, and the instinct of a bird—a power we do not possess since it is sixth sense—led them straight to the thirty they wanted when they decided to carry them back to the moon."

"But what in hell for?" I cried.

"To save our lives," he answered solemnly. "All thirty of us got to the Moon here, but we were badly smashed up in the doing, and we lost a good deal of blood. The Selenites—being differently constructed than we are—couldn't supply the necessary life-fluid—so they did the only thing possible and dispatched

agents to Earth to find blood-donors.

"Believe me, it has been worth it!" he finished. "The Moon, as you've seen for yourself, is not dead, and its race is very friendly towards us. We can give them much: they can give us much. The invasion of Earth was a necessary evil, but out of it will come untold benefit. You should feel proud, you and your friends, that you were chosen. You've become a bridge between worlds, and have laid the foundations of an interplanetary union."

I nodded slowly, gradually realizing the enormity of the thing that had been done. I caught Eva's eyes in the distance and knew that she realized the truth too.

Then I look up as I saw a claw-like hand extended towards me. Something like a smile was on the face of the Selenite surgeon.

THE END



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